

## ***God's Things***

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

October 22, 2023 – Sunday Morning Worship

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Stewardship Season

Text: Matthew 22:15-22

Well, it's been another tough week hasn't it. The news has been ever more awful, as if that could be possible. The weather offers little joy as once again we had a very rainy Saturday putting typical fall dry weather plans on hold. I mean, have you ever hiked through a corn maze in the rain? Or picked apples? And hay rides? Who are we kidding? Of course we can still ride around our neighborhoods to enjoy those of our neighbors who really *love* Halloween. You know who I mean. I don't know about your neighborhood but there do seem to be a preponderance of those giant light up spider webs that stretch up to the second floor of homes near us. Have any of your neighbors gotten into the new pumpkin carving craze this year? It seems that you make simple slits in the pumpkin and fill them with peanut butter. This leaves the carving to the teeth of local squirrels and the beaks of birds, and the results are – well – terrifying! My neighbors have gone all out this year, complete with a blow-up life size chainsaw guy on their front porch which terrifies Leila. Sigh... Halloween, only a slightly better experience for dogs than fireworks, at least in my house.

The thing is, Halloween this year doesn't seem that joyful or fun with or without the rainy weekends. The mood is heavy as we worry about the war brewing in Israel and the total lack of anything remotely resembling productivity happening on Capitol Hill. Usually I enjoy listening to the news as I drive around each day and I am an admitted newspaper junkie. But, honestly, that hasn't been much fun these past two weeks, as my thoughts inevitably turn to those hostages being held by Hamas in God knows what kind of conditions. I also

think about all the US sailors and submariners riding the waves at this moment in the Persian Gulf as not one, but two US aircraft carrier groups are on standby for it's too scary to imagine what.

I also can't imagine being the mom of one the Israeli Defense Force which has recalled their reservists from around the world. The IDF is something unique to Israel. It is comprised of men and woman who live all over the world but still retain a strong enough connection to Israel that they did military service for two years and then agreed to remain in the IDF reserves until they are 45 years old. All of these folks have been called back to active duty in Israel. These are accountants and college professors, lawyers and folks practicing all sorts of professions that have nothing to do with war and yet they are now on the ground in Israel reminding each other what it means to fight in streets and alleys, to shoot guns and artillery. We have nothing really comparable to this in this country so we really can't wrap our heads around it too easily. Israel activated the IDF and they came. They are on the ground in Israel now waiting for orders which can come at any time. They must be terrified even though they are very proud of being there to protect Israel, if the articles and interviews on radio and television are any indication. I can't imagine what is in their minds and hearts right now. I can't imagine if my children were there, facing death, for surely they are. Because that's what happens when warring groups slam into each other. Usually these slams are rhetorical, but not this time. Blood has been spilled. Innocent blood. Hostages taken and subjected to who knows what horrors. Revenge is necessary! Or is it?

Ironically this is sort of the same topic which is covered in today's story about yet another encounter Jesus has with the religious authorities – two different groups this time, the Pharisees and the Herodians. They are still trying to get him to make a mistake that

could be grounds for his arrest, so they offer him false flattery about how he's so good at being impartial in these conversations. Then they ask him if he thinks it is lawful for the local people to pay taxes to Rome. To our ears this seems like a simple question but it's really quite fraught. Jesus knows the people hate the Romans who keep them brutally subjugated, exacting taxes far beyond what should be asked. He knows the tax collectors are all cheats, making a profit on the backs of the people who could least afford it. Jesus also knows these religious leaders would like nothing better than for him to say something negative about Rome so they could have him arrested. But, once again, Jesus is too smart for them. He asks them for a denarius, a Roman coin. Then Jesus asks them, whose head is on this coin and what is his title. They answer him quickly, the emperor's. And that's when Jesus delivers the punch line to this story which still echoes over the centuries, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." No arguing with that answer so the religious authorities once more just skulked away.

But these words of Jesus still reverberate across the millennia, raising their own questions. What precisely are the things that belong to the emperor, the government if you will, and what precisely are the things that belong to God? If you think about this for longer than a minute, the complexity of this answer becomes increasingly clear. This is in truth a question about power, about sovereignty, about who has control and who doesn't. Theologian Karoline Lewis explains that she sees this story as a perfect one for our time. She was writing on this text for an online blog I follow called *Working Preacher*. In 2017, she wrote,

"As soon as we get comfortable or complacent in our preaching and in our teaching, as soon as we think our voice cannot be heard or that it will be silenced anyway; as soon as we think resistance is futile; as soon as

we think marches don't matter; as soon as we think our phone calls to our representatives and senators will only end up in a voicemail box; as soon as we assume racism and sexism, xenophobia and homophobia are so systemic that our efforts to speak up and speak out won't be of importance, Matthew comes along and reminds us that persistence is the hallmark of the Kingdom of Heaven."<sup>1</sup>

Lewis wrote this six years ago and it is even more appropriate today. She reminds us forcefully that Matthew's text outlines in no uncertain terms that we are citizens of a temporal, earthly government but that this does not in any way negate that first and foremost we belong to God. We are, first, foremost and always, God's people, called by God to a life devoted to love and justice for all God's beloved people. We belong to God and we are accountable to God in ways we will never be accountable to any human authority, to any human government.

We forget this, we really do. We want to put our faith, our relationship with Jesus, our understanding of what it is Jesus expects of us in a neat little box we can keep on the shelf and pull down when we need it because we are sad or scared or feel lonely. But, dear ones, that is a one-way relationship that is never what God intended for us. God's relationship with God's people has always been a covenantal one that requires give and take. God asks us, invites us, expects us to be about "God's things" as we make our way through our lives each day. Jesus is actually pretty clear about this in today's text. We must always give to God the things which are God's. These cannot just be the leftovers from the rest of our lives – the remnants of our time, talent, and treasure that haven't already been gobbled up by earning a living and building a life filled with stuff. When we talk about giving to God the things which are God's, we are not talking about clearing out the clutter from our lives and giving God the stuff we don't want anymore, like some cosmic yard sale. We're not talking about fitting

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<sup>1</sup> Karoline Lewis, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/loyalties>

God, and church life, into the odd sized spaces of our lives which aren't already filled up with other things. We are talking about doing just as Jesus teaches in today's text from Matthew – giving to God what belongs to God, and dear ones, that is the entirety of who we are and how we approach life each day. Giving to God what belongs to God creates the foundation on which our lives as followers of Jesus are built, empowered by the Holy Spirit to be about God's things each day. This asks so much more of us than just flipping a coin to see what happens as we try to figure out what belongs to God as our lives unfold each day. The answer to that, at least, is simple. Everything. Everything belongs to God.

So can we be more specific about “God's things” as Jesus names them? If we reframe this question within the context of our Stewardship conversations which begin this week, then one way to understand giving God's things to God is never just about money – Jesus using the Roman coin as his teaching example notwithstanding. Giving to God the things that are God's really comes down to giving back to God a little of our most precious commodities – our time, talent and treasure. This morning, I'd like us to think about giving back to God some of that most precious of things in our lives which is our time, something always in short supply for all of us!

Allow me to close by sharing with you one of my favorite children's messages of all times. This particular one is not one I offered as a minister but instead one I experienced myself as a small child. I was maybe 7 or 8, sitting on the big folding chairs in the church hall where Sunday School happened each week in the little Presbyterian Church I grew up in outside Pittsburgh, PA. On this day, Mrs. Thornton, the Sunday School Superintendent, was giving the lesson at our opening exercises as she did every week. She had a long, long, long piece of thick string stretched across the whole front of the

large hall where our classes met. It was all white except for one tiny section about 5 inches long which was bright red. She explained that the entire string represented all the minutes contained in a week. Then she asked what we thought the red string represented and there were all kinds of guesses. I don't remember many of those, but I do remember the answer. That little red string represented her calculation of the amount of time each of us gave to God each week. She was including the hour of Sunday School followed by the hour or worship and a few minutes each day for grace at meals and bedtime prayers – actually a very generous assumption on her part. The rest of the white string represented what we did with the rest of our time during the week. Even the smallest of us could see right away that none of us spent much time on God's things. We didn't give much back to God at all, especially considering all that God is always doing for us. It was now painfully clear that none of us invested much time in paying attention to God's things in our lives. And in what I still consider a stroke of sheer brilliance, dear Mrs. Thornton ended with a question to all of us – “do you think that's fair?” What an amazing question to ask a room full of elementary aged kids who are preoccupied with what's fair and what isn't. No! We all shouted! That's when she looked at us and smiled as she said, “well then, I guess you'll need to do something about it.” She was right and sixty years later, she still is.

God's things. God's place in our lives. God's abiding love for us no matter what. God's beloved creation and all the people and critters in it. What do you imagine we in our church might be able to do about how this world is dealing with God's things? Unquestionably there is a lot we're already doing – like the Pollinator Gardens and our monthly Mission projects but there is so much more we might consider. Where might we look to find ways we can make God's

presence real to people who have no idea who God is or why knowing God matters? These are our questions for these days in which we are living, dear ones. May we hold on to our awareness, our celebration, our commitment to cherishing God's things as God's beloved people each and every day. May we live each day as the gift from God that it is. Amen.