

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Proper 24 (A) ~ 18 October 2026
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Exodus 33:12-23
Psalm 99
Matthew 22:15-22

With All that I Am and All that I Have

Every family has its stories – you know, the ones that are told around that table at Thanksgiving, or at rehearsal dinners. Here is one of ours:

It was a dark, cold, rainy Halloween night in suburban New York. My husband and I were in the front seat of our Honda Odyssey minivan, so relieved to be heading home – finally – after a long night of Trick or Treating. Because we lived in a Rectory, on church property (as we do now), we weren't really in a neighborhood...so we used to drive our three boys to other parts of town where, strategically, they could hit as many houses in as little times as possible. But because they were still little, of course we couldn't just park and let them go; we were out there with them.

And we were drenched. We had earned our "Good Parenting" merit badges and now looked forward to getting our sugared-up children bathed and in bed. Stopped at a red light, Randy turned around and called to the bigger two, who were in the far back of the van, pawing through their orange plastic pumpkin buckets like squirrels digging for acorns.

Guys, pass a couple of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups up here to Mommy and me, please!

And then came the response, between bites:

We will...If there's any left over.

I can assure you: That story *will* be told next year at a certain rehearsal dinner!

What I loved (and love, still) about that moment is that there was no guile, no posturing, no artifice: Just the naked truth that Dad and Mom *might* get something once they were satisfied.

Those little boys were clear about their priorities.

You can have the leftovers.

But what about us so-called “grown-ups”? What are *our* priorities?

This is essentially the question Jesus asks in today’s Gospel.

The Pharisees (the Jewish sect committed to Torah and Jewish practice) and the Herodians (the political group who supports the occupying Roman rulers) have joined forces to try to trap Jesus into committing heresy against God *or* treason against the emperor – either of which offense would have dire consequences. They ask Him whether or not it lawful for Jews to pay taxes to the emperor, and if Jesus says yes, it will seem as though He is putting the demands of the State above those of God. But if He says no, then He will be seen as defying the government and inciting rebellion among the poor.

He can’t win.

So Jesus catches the Pharisees and Herodians out in their own game. Did you notice that, when Jesus asks them to show Him the coin used for the tax, they pull it out right away? Think about it: They immediately produce Roman coinage, stamped with the emperor’s face and the inscription, “Son of the Divine Augustus.” They have it on them, there in the Temple. But a coin that declares the emperor as “god” is not allowed in that holy place.¹

Gotcha!

But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He asks, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” And they respond, “The emperor’s.” And then He says, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

¹ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper24a/#Matthew22%3A15-22>

It's a common expression in our time, too. It's often used in terms of fulfilling one's duty, of meeting one's civic obligations.

Jesus is very clear: the emperor's head, his image, is on the coin, so Jews should give Caesar his due. Fair enough. But notice what Jesus does *not* say. Notice Whose head, Whose image, is *not* on the coin – and why? When Jesus tells His accusers to “render unto Caesar,” He also implies something that is not lost on the Pharisees, in particular. God's image is not on the coin – or on any other material object, for that matter. Jewish Law forbids it (Exodus 20:3-5). So it is one thing to pay allegiance to the government, but let's be clear: Thou shalt not worship it. We are to have no other gods before the Lord our God, so everything else – yes, *everything* (and everybody) else – comes second. Period.

But that's not all: When Jesus asks whose head is on the coin, the Greek word, *eikon*, means an image or likeness of any kind. Anything that represents something else is an *eikon*. In Christian spiritual practice, an icon is a window through which we look to get a closer glimpse of God.

Jesus commands them to give to the emperor the things that are emperor's *because the emperor's image is on the coin*. Following that logic, we are to give to God those things that bear God's image. And what are those?

From Genesis:

God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them (Gen. 1:27).

Whether we take the Creation accounts in the Hebrew Bible literally or not, a fundamental doctrine, a basic teaching of Judeo-Christian theology, is that we humans are created in the image of God and consequently have tremendous value.

This is why our baptismal covenant requires that we “seek and serve Christ in all persons,” and “respect the dignity of every human being” (*BCP*, p. 305). Our humanity has worth precisely because we *all* are created and fashioned in the image of God and are all God's children. All of us – each and every one.

When Jesus says that we should give God what belongs to God, He means that which bears God's image, God's *eikon*. In other words, we are to give God our whole selves. Put that way, paying taxes doesn't seem so bad!

So what does it mean to give God our whole selves? Or, put another way, in what parts of our lives do we paw through our figurative pumpkin buckets to see what leftovers we might offer God?

Maybe the first thing that comes to mind for you is *money*. This is, in fact, a big consideration: Does your spending suggest that God is a priority, or not? I don't *just* mean what you give to the Church (although I certainly hope and pray that St. Dunstan's is an important part of your financial life). But I'm also asking about causes you support: Do *they* reflect a commitment to respecting the dignity of every human being? Do your purchases demonstrate a thoughtful, prayerful concern for the environment and all of God's Creation?

How about *time*? If you were to audit the hours of a typical day, how much time do you spend in prayer? In quiet contemplation of God's love and majesty? Or in learning more about God by reading and studying the Bible? Or how about in service to others? Where, exactly, does your time go?

And finally, what about your *heart*? This is the most essential – and perhaps the most difficult – part of ourselves to render to God. The word for having “faith,” by the way, literally means “setting one's heart upon” something. To give God our hearts is to offer ourselves – our love, our doubts, our questions, our anger – to God. It is to nurture a *real* relationship, trusting God enough to risk being honest...about *everything*.

And letting God take it from there.

I've been working on this last one a lot lately, as I stand on a cliff, peering over the edge and wondering what the future – what *my* future – will hold. I am learning – again, as I have at so many points in my life – how to put my tender and easily bruised heart in God's hands.

The best way that *I* know how to do this is in community. By sharing my joys and my struggles with trusted others authentically. By showing up – not only in body but in soul. By practicing lowering my mask, the “persona” I present to the world, in order to be the person God created me to be.

Building up one’s trust, or faith, muscle requires repetition – like training our brains with Wordle or working out our bodies. It doesn’t happen overnight.

I hope that you don’t hear me saying that I have this all together, because I surely don’t. I am a pilgrim on the journey right there beside you...on a good day. Often I feel as though I am lagging behind; I am in awe of many of you who live your faith so whole-heartedly. I long to be like you when I grow up!

In the marriage liturgy of the Episcopal Church, just after the couple has professed their vows “to have and to hold, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish,” they exchange rings. Listen to what each partner says to the other at this moment:

*I give you this ring as a symbol of my vow, and with all
that I am, and all that I have, I honor you...*

All that I am, and all that I have.

This is what God asks us to give. Not just the leftovers at the bottom of the pumpkin bucket.

What will *you* share with God today?

Amen.