

I

Recently I had the chance to spend some time with my neighbors and their little boys, the youngest of whom is a toddler who is just beginning to learn to speak. You can't help but smile when a young child smiles at you and says, "Please" and "thank you," which, in his case, comes out more like "Peas and tank you."

Those little phrases, please and thank you, those are some of the first words all of us learn to say. When we're learning a foreign language, one of the first phrases we learn is how to say thank you. As human beings, one of the things we seem to know intuitively is the importance of gratitude.

II

For most of this month, we've been talking about the power of gratitude. For us as people of faith, gratitude is about more than good manners. It's about more than recognizing that we're in another's debt. It's about more than saying please and thank you, as important as those phrases are.

For we who follow Jesus Christ, gratitude is the key that unlocks the kind of peace that Jesus promised his disciples on the night of his betrayal and arrest. In John's gospel, on the night he knew he would be betrayed and arrested, nevertheless Jesus gathered for dinner with those whom he loved, and he said to them, "My peace I give to you. My peace I leave with you. I do not give to you as the world gives, so do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Theologically understood, gratitude is the recognition that all that we have, all

that we are, all that we will ever be, is a gift from God who is so gracious, so extravagantly generous, that God did not even withhold God's own son from us. Every time we look at the cross, are reminded of the height and depth and width and breadth of God's love for us. For us, gratitude is the key to the kind of peace the Apostle Paul speaks of in a letter he composed from inside a Roman prison, the peace that passes all understanding, the peace that keeps and guards and protects our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of God's only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

And as we've gone along this month, we've been talking about gratitude, and we've also been naming some of the habits and practices that if we're not careful, can move us away from gratitude. We've been naming some of gratitude's enemies. Already this summer, we've named enemies like nostalgia and worry – the practice of either being so focused on the past or so anxious about the future that we miss the miracles that God is doing in the here and now, right here in our midst.

Two weeks ago, we read a parable from the gospel of Matthew about a wedding banquet, and we named an enemy of gratitude called entitlement. And today, we're picking up right where we left off in Matthew's gospel two weeks ago.

III

Our text this morning comes from the 22nd chapter of Matthew's gospel, and when we come to the story, it's the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry. Already, Jesus has entered Jerusalem, greeted by children waving palm branches and people lining the roads shouting "Hosanna." Jesus

has entered the Temple and created quite a stir by driving out the money changers and turning over their tables, and he has been preaching and teaching all along, astounding all who hear him, while the various power factions in Jerusalem have begun plotting about how to be rid of him.

In order to fully grasp what's happening in our story today, a little history will be helpful. In those days, Jerusalem was a city under foreign occupation. A few decades before the birth of Jesus, the Roman empire had more or less conquered the entire known world. Their territory stretched from modern day Brittain to modern day India, and the saying was the sun never set on Rome.

On a comparative basis, the Romans allowed for a great deal of religious freedom in their conquered lands. People were free to worship whatever gods they chose, so long as they were also willing to acknowledge that the Roman emperor was also a god. Most of their subjects had no problem with this. They only exceptions were this little group who lived in and around Jerusalem, who insisted that there were not many gods, but only one God who was Lord of all, one God who explicitly forbids the worship of any other gods.

They say that politics makes for strange bedfellows, and such was true there in the Temple. On the one hand, there was a group called the Pharisees, a group of faithful Jews who were deathly serious about keeping God's laws and who detested their Roman occupiers. And on the other hand was a group called the Herodians, a group of Jews who were not as concerned with keeping God's commandments as they were with enriching themselves by sidling up to their Roman occupiers.

And so that's the context for our story today in Matthew's gospel. It's the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry. He is teaching in the Temple, and the different power factions, who ordinarily would have nothing to do with one another, have decided that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and so they have come together in hopes to rid themselves of Jesus once and for all.

So listen now for a Word from God from Matthew 22:15-22.

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' 21 They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' 22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

You see the trap, don't you? Because if Jesus answers no, it's unlawful to pay taxes to the emperor, then the Romans will come and snatch him up on charges of tax evasion and sedition. But if he says yes, pay taxes to the emperor, then the religious

zealots in the crowd will stone him as a blasphemer and idolater. It's a no-win situation for Jesus.

But as he so often does, Jesus answers their question with a question of his own. He says, "Does anyone have a coin? Someone show me the coin used for the tax." And there's an awkward pause while the Pharisees and the Herodians look at each other, and they dig in their pockets and fumble around trying to find a Roman coin called a denarius.

Someone finds one, and they bring it nervously to Jesus, and he holds it up and examines it like he's never seen one before. And he says, in Ryan's rough translation, "There seems to be a picture on this coin. Whose image is this?"

The coin, of course, bears the icon of the emperor, and although the text doesn't say so, next to the icon of the emperor in Jesus' hand was likely this inscription, "Tiberius Casesar, son of the Divine Augustus."

Suddenly, this is a question about far bigger issues than tax policies and budgets. The juxtaposition that Matthew paints for us here, the Son of God, standing in the Temple, the building that symbolizes the very presence of God on earth, holding in his hand an object bearing the image of the emperor. Suddenly, this is a cosmic question. Who is it that holds ultimate authority in our world? Who is it that holds ultimate power? To whom does the world belong?

I imagine that Jesus flipped the little coin back to whomever gave it to him, and then he said, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

When the people heard this, they were amazed, and rightly so. Because what Jesus is saying is that as powerful as Caesar appears to be, he has nothing compared to the power and majesty and wealth of God. The sun might not set on Caesar's lands, but it is the God of Israel is the one who made the sun and the land, the one who sets the stars on their courses, the one who sets the limits of the sea. The Caesars of the world will come, and they will go, but the God of Israel is the one who was and is and is to come.

So Jesus says, give Caesar his little coins. But give to God the things that are God's, and the biblical truth is that it *all* belongs to God. Psalm 24:1 says the earth is the Lord's, and all that is therein, the world, and those who live in it.

IV

Ultimately, everything belongs to God.

You may have heard this parable before, but bear with me. Some scientists, after years and years of research, discovered how to create new life from nothing more than dirt, just as God did according to Genesis 2. So they made an appointment with God, and on the appointed day, they stood before the throne of God and said, "God, we have discovered how to make life out of nothing more than dirt, just as you did." And God, said, "Oh, that's very interesting. Very well, then, let's see what you've got." And so the scientists huddled together, and they said, "OK, boys, this is it, let's do it." And they stood before the throne of God, and one of them bent down, and just as he was about to scoop a fistful of dirt into his hands, God said,

“Whoa whoa whoa. Go make your own dirt.”

My friend, despite what our culture teaches us about ownership, despite the ways in which we’ve ordered our economy and indeed our daily lives, there is a larger truth that underscores it all. Everything, your assets, your relationships, your very body – does not ultimately belong to you. Everything you have belongs to God, and God has entrusted some of what is rightfully God’s to your management and care. And when we begin to come to that realization, when we begin to come to the realization of just how generous and loving and powerful and majestic God is, when we begin to realize that there’s nothing that God wouldn’t give for us, including God’s one and only Son, then we can’t help but be filled with gratitude.

But when we forget that concept, we open ourselves up to one of gratitude’s sneakiest enemies – an enemy whose name is greed. Greed causes us to doubt God’s generosity and to distrust in God’s promises.

One of the stories our ancestors in faith tell us is about the time when God freed us from years of misery and bondage in the land of Egypt by bringing us through the waters of the Red Sea. But on the other side of the Red Sea, there was a barren dessert. There was no food in the dessert and no way to grow anything or hunt anything before starvation set in. And so God said, “I am going to make it rain bread from heaven for you. In the morning, each of you shall go out and gather enough for that day. And on the sixth day, you shall gather twice of what you need so that on the seventh day you may rest. And sure enough, every morning, the people went

out, and there was enough to go around. But some of our ancestors started to doubt God’s promise. They started to forget who and whose they were. They started to let nostalgia and worry and entitlement take the place of gratitude within their hearts. They started to let greed set in, and they began to sneak a little more than what they needed for that day. But when they got it home and opened it up, it was full of worms.

V

Greed is one of gratitude’s oldest and most clever enemies. Greed tells us all kinds lies. Greed tells us that the only things that matter in this life are what you can see, hold, and buy. Greed tells us that neither God nor our neighbors can be trusted. Greed tells us that our value and worth can be measured by what we have and what we can get, rather than by who and whose we are. Greed makes us stand in the dwelling place of the most high God and quibble over the emperor’s little coins.

But Jesus says, my peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives, so do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. Jesus says at my table, there’s always enough to go around. Jesus says let Caesar have his coins. But let the people of God remember always who and whose they are and whom they serve.

And so I just happen to have here a little coin. And on it is an inscription that says, “In God we trust.”

Do you? Do we?