

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the twentieth Sunday after Pentecost: "Give to God what is God's"

So have you heard the one about the scientist who set out to prove that there's nothing God can do that humans can't?

One day, to his shock and amazement, God actually spoke to him and took him up on his challenge. "Ok," God said, "How about this? Can you make a human being out of the dust of the Earth?"

"Of course," the scientist replied with a smirk on his face. "That's an easy one."

So the scientist and God agreed upon a time and place for their contest. The big day arrived, and both contestants took their places. When the whistle was blown for the contest to begin, the scientist immediately took up a big scoopful of soil in his hand. But God turned to him indignant and said, "Wait just a second, that's against the rules! Go get your own dirt!"

While I suppose there are some times and places where we underestimate ourselves, I believe that we way too often grossly underestimate God.

"Whose head is this, and whose title?" Jesus asks.

"The emperor's," they reply.

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's."

OK, well and good. I guess that means that the coin used to pay the tax goes to the emperor. Hmm, and the produce the laborer spent all day picking goes to the company that owns the land. And the rent goes to the landlord. And the patent for that new piece of software you developed goes to the company CEO. And to God, hummmmm, well, we'll get back to that.

I think that pretty much covers it, right?

Or does it?

There are several clarifying questions Jesus could have asked in today's parable but didn't.

"What is the coin made of?"

"Bronze."

"Where does bronze come from?"

"The Earth and human labor."

"Who made the Earth?"

"Errrrrrr"

"OK, shelve that question for a moment. How about the human labor?"

"Well, they're all slaves, so they belong to the masters."

"And to whom does the master belong?"

"Well, to the emperor I suppose."

"And to whom does the emperor belong?"

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees was an excellent way to avoid the trap they had set for him, but the real punch line to this story is not what he said but what he didn’t say. Sure, give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, but nothing is the emperor’s! In the divine economy, the only true economy, the emperor is in the same financial position as the rest of us. He’s penniless.

Yes, for all the pomp, for all the grandeur, the emperor exists in abject poverty. If God is who we say God is, than absolutely nothing in all creation, not even a fraction of an atom, can be said to not belong to anyone but God.

The emperor’s poverty may in fact be even more severe than that of the slave, because the slave is at least aware that she does not legitimately own anything. The emperor lives in delusion.

And so do we all to some extent. In our heart’s imaginings, we so often see the possessions and achievements of ourselves and our communities as our personal property, something we earned and are entitled to keep sequestered away for our exclusive use and enjoyment.

Now please don’t think I’m saying that others are somehow always entitled to that for which we have labored. I am not. I am, however, noting that anything and everything we have can ultimately be traced back to a gift that came not of our own designs but of God.

Now this is a very humbling realization, but it’s also an oddly liberating one.

It's especially liberating in the season we're facing right now. Less than three weeks from now, one of the most bizarre and contentious elections will reach its culmination. In these weeks leading up to that moment, it's way too easy to get caught up in all the bluster and drama.

Each side seems to be telling us that the fate of universe depends upon their candidates and their agendas winning the day while the other side is utterly destroyed. Both are mistaken. Both are operating under the emperor's delusion.

If we can take a step back and give the situation a sober look for just a moment, we can see clearly that this and all elections are ultimately about the distribution of money, goods, and property. Each side speaks about that disposition in language that implies that individuals and groups actually have complete ownership of these things. They are mistaken.

So what does this mean for us? It means that while this election is undeniably important, it is not by any means reason for us to be overcome with anxiety. The fate of the universe does not rest on its outcome. The politicians may be deluded into thinking that they or the people they're beholden to have legitimate and exclusive ownership of things, but we don't have to fall for that delusion. We need not be so anxious.

We also can use the wisdom of today's parable to help distill what choices we will make as we vote. Absolutely no candidate is perfect, and no legislation provides perfect solutions to our human dilemmas. There is, however, I believe a guiding principle we can use as we discern what to do with our ballots.

Who are the people who best understand that we are the stewards of everything but owners of nothing? Who are the ones who recognize that ultimately all things belong to and must be given back to God their source? What policies and what propositions best reflect this great spiritual truth?

This is where I must leave you. I have my own answers to these questions, and discerning yours is up to you. In terms of which boxes to tick on the ballot, the right way to vote as a Christian is something that is up to the individual believer's conscience.

In today's parable, however, we are encouraged to do this without anxiety and to remember one key truth. Nothing belongs to the emperor, and everything belongs to God. Let your vote and let your life be a testimony to this.