



St. John's is a community of faith. We belong together because we share some common beliefs, although there are plenty of nuances in the details of those beliefs and how we live them out. We gather together at the table to partake of the bread and wine- the body and blood of Christ- even as some of us may believe the bread and wine are transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ and some of us may believe they are symbols but still the same bread and wine that we eat and drink at dinner in our own homes. Whatever place we find ourselves on the continuum of the meaning of the Eucharist, we still belong together as a community of faith.

We have responsibilities to others in addition to St. John's. Many of us still work and so we have responsibilities to our employers. Our employers may have set rules and requirements that we don't always agree with, but we need to comply with in order to keep our paycheck and pay our bills. Hopefully none of our employer's requirements cut too deeply into our faith, but there may very well be conflicts from time to time. How we navigate those conflicts can tell us a lot about our lived faith.

And, the area of Outreach is an example for us in this faith community. Some of us may agree with everything the Outreach committee is doing and some of us may not. Or we like this project but not that project. Defining Outreach and the mission of St. John's in responding to Christ's command to love our neighbor, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit those who are sick is both an individual and a collective responsibility. To have differences is absolutely not to say one is "right" and the other is "wrong."

In Matthew, chapter 22, we have the infamous meeting between Jesus and the Pharisees and Herodians who are trying to trap Jesus into a response which would enable them to lay charges against Jesus that would lead to Jesus' death for treason or sedition.

Br. James Koester reminds us that the Herodians and the Pharisees were not big fans of one another.¹ Yet they are united in their opposition to Jesus. The Pharisees were careful keepers of the Law and the Herodians, by the fact that they supported Herod's collaboration with the Romans were not observant in their keeping of the Law. Yet here, as elsewhere in the Gospels, they unite in a common cause, to trap Jesus with their question and his answer.

¹ Much of what follows is a sermon by Br. James Koester, SSJE. www.ssje.org/2012/06/05/belonging-to-god-br-james-koester/ (October 21, 2017). I am also deeply indebted to Brene Brown in *Braving the Wilderness* (Random House, 2017).

They ask: “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. Tell us then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

But Jesus walks through this trap and instead lays one himself. “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Neither the Herodians, nor the Pharisees would have found offence in Jesus’ answer. At least until they were half way home. On the one hand Jesus appears to support the legitimacy of the Roman occupation while on the other hand he affirms the sovereignty of God. Thus the trap set, springs not on Jesus, but on those who put him to the test, and especially the Herodians. For those who heard the answer, like Jesus, would have known that Psalm 24, verses 1-2: “[t]he earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers.” They would know the story of creation in Genesis where it is clear that God created all that exists and thus all that exists comes from God and belong to God.

The underlying question asked of Jesus - although not expressly articulated - is nothing less than “to whom do we belong?” This question was perhaps uppermost in the minds of the Jewish residents of Palestine, a country occupied by imperial Rome. To whom did they belong; the Roman Emperor or the God of Israel? To many the answer was clear, but the reality was otherwise. The Temple, the observance of the Law, the daily rituals showed one thing, but the presence of an occupying army, even the coin of the land showed otherwise. It was clear to whom they appeared to belong, yet whispering in the back of their minds was another answer: “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell therein.”

To whom do I belong? Where do I belong? What does it mean to belong? Whose am I? This in a sense was the question posed to Jesus and his answer was clear. We may have responsibilities to Caesar, but we belong to God. Our need to belong is critically important to us and to our ability to function in the world.

Having responsibilities is one thing. Belonging is quite different. Responsibilities are about obligations. Belonging is about love. Responsibilities are about commitments. Belonging is about identity. We all have obligations and commitments but we also have an identity shaped by love. Jesus was reminding his audience that we all have commitments and obligations as citizens, but our identity as persons is shaped by God’s love for us and that can only be found in union with God.

The Herodians and the Pharisees set out to trap Jesus with their question about taxation. What Jesus revealed in his answer was not a defense about paying tax or a reflection on responsibilities and obligations. Jesus’ answer is a reminder that we all belong to God and that it where we find our true identity as persons.

That we are loved by God and belong to God is what makes us who and whose we are, not if and where we pay taxes or hold positions of responsibility or have certain commitments.

In a funny way that is the gift that Jesus gave to us when he reminded us to give to God the things that are God’s. In so doing he reminded us that we too belong to God and as the Apostle Paul wrote, “in God we live and move and have our being.” You belong here. You belong to God and it is there that we find our true identity. **Amen.**