

## TOUCHING TAXES

Texts on Sunday, November 13, 2011

*Romans 12: 1-13; Matthew 22: 16-22*

Almost 180 years ago, the French citizen Alexis de Tocqueville traveled the new America and later described the character of our people in essays which still startle us Americans with features so recognizable. He saw, for example, our vaunted individualism. He defined it this way:

a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself . . . Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine their whole destiny is in their hands. (*Democracy in America*, p. 508)

You could say that something of today's Tea Party has been part of America from the beginning. Its creed is hardly clear but it contains the belief that *What's mine is mine and I got it with nobody's help*. The extreme expression of this mantra once belonged to libertarians only, with Ayn Rand their evangelist. But since Ronald Reagan taught the catechism that "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem," hundreds of politicians have been born again to the religion of self and wealth.

Now, Ayn Rand was no friend of Christianity, so we can understand her gleeful embrace of the god of money and self, but no Christian, regardless of politics, can have any business with this doomed doctrine. It is plain crazy, both spiritually and psychologically, to assert *What's mine is mine* while calling oneself Christian. Christians have only one word. *Thine, not mine, O Lord, are all things*. Sixteen centuries ago, Augustine put it this way: *Quid habes quod non accepisti?* What do you have that you did not receive?

Last Sunday, we started thinking about the myth of scarcity and the reality of abundance in the gift of generosity. As we prepare to offer next week the pledges and estimates of our financial support for the ministries of Riverside in 2012, let us think about what it can mean to pray "All things are yours alone, O God. Open unto us how we may offer all things unto you." Let us turn toward just one arc in this vast horizon, a question of our citizenship with humanity.

When Jesus is asked about paying taxes, his death is days away, according to Matthew. They are trying to get something to use against him in court. They aim to trap him into an impossible division of loyalties, but he is used to this. When at his prompting they produce a coin, he asks. "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" They say what they see: Caesar's image. "Give then to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Jesus just ignores the question, "What's mine?" Now, he has not forgotten that humans constantly think

in those terms. But in his counsel, personal property has literally no place. *What have you which you did not receive?* The ancient lawyers testing Jesus are astounded. To understand why, think as a lawyer of those ancient days would think. Their law was Torah. Genesis. Exodus. Leviticus. Numbers. Deuteronomy.

Consider. If the image minted on a coin shows the owner of the coin, and if therefore to Caesar belong Caesar's coins, it follows that to God belongs God's coins. On what coin is the image of God minted? Follow the money! The answer best known is found in Genesis 1:26: "And God said, Let us make humanity in our image . . . so God created humanity; in the image of God God created them; male and female, God created them." You are the coin on which God's image is stamped. Give yourself, then. And think not of yourself merely individually, for the image of God is set in humanity as a whole, for God created God's image "male and female." The image belongs to the whole of us.

When Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's," at his reply, the lawyers suddenly feel their own depth, their own release. This is what amazes them. It is like that sudden freedom in the air around a great abundant waterfall, or when you crest a hot sand dune and come down to the boundless sea. In an instant, the lawyers are swept away from their power struggles and corrupting self-concern; swept up into the abundance of reality. Your whole humanity, give. All your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength. Trouble no more to whine *What's mine is mine*. Stop your discord, diversion, and delay. Be at peace. Be at one with your depth. Give yourself, give all things to God.

The spiritual discipline is to replace the insipid incessant tune, *What's mine is mine* with the wise rhyme, *What's mine is Thine*. To help us in this direction, the apostle Paul counsels the church to get sober about our existence in community, about our citizenship. "We who are many are one body, and individually members of one another . . . Therefore, let love be genuine. Love one another with mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." Now, some part of us, hearing this, is saying, "Well, I'll do it when *they* do it. I'll start contributing to the saints when those fools start acting like saints." Then the whole thing is lost, of course. The most consistent characteristic of a community in trouble—that is, a community not able to function according to its core values—is the certainty with which individual members hold others responsible for the problems of the whole, and act, or refuse to act, until *they* change or leave.

Let's be plain. According to Jesus, according to Paul, according to all the wisdom of the Spirit, if you want to get out of this mess—church mess, city mess, U.S. mess—there is one thing only that you must do. You've got to get generous. You've got to give. You've got to stop plotting how to keep what's yours, withholding yourself or your money or both from people and groups who disappoint you. You've got to render—surrender—to God what is God's. It's the only way out of here.

Many who call themselves Christian dumb down Jesus' demand by shrinking their idea of community tight around their tribe, so that the only ones I've got to love are my church, or rather, the people I like at church, or even only the ones who like me. But this practice of taking liberty to shrink the community you love down to the size you choose is the very reasoning church people used to slaughter Native Americans with chilling confidence, to enslave all of South America and as much of Africa as they could lay their greedy bloody hands on, and to press the black man into prison by the millions. It's always done by shrinking the circumference of my love to my size. If you want the salvation from your sorrows which Jesus promises, rather than the one you ever anxiously struggle for, take Jesus' word home. Your tribe is too small. Your anger is killing you. Give to God what is God's. Take citizenship in a body bigger than you know.

Let's start where Jesus starts. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." At the very least, this means *Pay your taxes*. Let's think about taxes. The American scramble to guard what's mine consumes so much oxygen from the nation's air that almost everything said about taxes these days is plain stupid. One of our misleaders constantly prompted us with the notion that "It's your money," as if every cent of tax is a kind of theft. (If the devil has minions, misleaders like that are surely his favorites.) Let us think this through, even as if we had no training in Christianity whatsoever. Is all your stuff simply yours? That can't be. Can you protect it by yourself, O pioneer? Let's concede that a shirt and a belt, and perhaps a bowl to mash berries in is truly yours, since you could fight off the thief who'd steal it. But a house, or a horse—something they might plot to take from you? These are not yours absolutely! These are yours by agreement. We have made agreements to protect your things for your use, with laws and courts and police and fire fighters. Your goods are not yours. They are yours by agreement.

We have agreed all together to train those who uphold these agreements from the first day of school to the last, and to pay them. Why, we agreed to build and maintain the roads they needed to get to school and to work, and receive the food they haven't time to grow and . . . This litany could go on forever. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Herbert Simon has written that this "social capital" accounts for at least 90% of what people earn in wealthy nations. This term "social capital" refers to all the resources, technology, education, and skills that hold us together, as well as good government. "On moral grounds," Simon writes "we could argue for a flat income tax of 90%." He doesn't advocate for that as policy, but his point certainly undermines the whine that what's mine is mine. Oh no! The comfortable are not rich as a result of their hard work. Rather, if what Simon says is so, just 10% of what's mine is mine because I work so hard. The rest comes from an abundance of support.

The human network of care which makes your life possible is only slightly less complex and incomprehensibly wonderful than the mystery of existence itself. Untold time and care sustain that network. The phrase "It's your money"

is nothing less than the rallying cry of total rebellion against God. It is not your money. So far from being evil, the levying and paying of taxes are, in principle, the only absolutely good thing that a nation actually does together. Of course it is possible that taxes be too heavy and their sums misspent. Equally, it is possible that taxes can be too little for what the whole community needs in order to get on with goodness, beauty, and truth. So, for many of us, then, getting to generous, spiritually speaking, begins with correcting our relationship to the whole fellowship of our city and our nation, starting with a realistic and fair agreement about taxes and about wages.

Last spring, I testified before the City Council in support of the Fair Wages for New Yorkers Act. Mostly, testimonies gave sound reasons to honor the poorest workers in our midst with the dignity of a fair wage. I agree. My testimony, however, looked at the matter from a different angle. I quoted former NYC chancellor of schools Joel Klein who said of this nation, “We’re rapidly moving toward two Americas—a wealthy elite, and an increasingly large underclass . . . This division tears at the very fabric of our society.” My testimony concluded this way:

Economic justice for the poorest is in the highest self-interest of the wealthy. The wise see this, for they know that their interests are not for themselves alone but for their children’s children and for all children. When this wealthy city stands up in wisdom with a law and a lamp to welcome the weak and the weary—why, a whole nation is watching. Councillors, you could not choose a stronger means than this bill to mend the fabric of our torn society and renew a future for all the people for a new century.”

Of course, higher wages for the poorest must be paid through higher taxes from those who can afford it. But even those who whine *What’s mine is mine!* will be better off on the day that we win, who see the morality of defending our unity and our community through equity. Learn the pattern in generosity.

One week from tomorrow night, on Monday November 21, the saints will will go marching in to this sanctuary here in The Riverside Church to claim as God’s the call for action on a living wage for the poorest workers in our city. If from the beginning, something of the Tea Party’s desperate pursuit of loneliness has troubled the American character, so also has something of Occupy Wall Street’s hope for generosity, justice, and joy been saving America’s soul from the beginning. Oh, I want to be in that number when the saints go marching in. I pray you will come out to pray for peace in a new day for a whole community. To Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s!

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The Riverside Church  
in the City of New York

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