

ENCOURAGEMENT TO ENCOURAGE OTHERS

October 19, 2014

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

19th Sunday of Pentecost

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

Exodus 33:12-23

Psalms 99

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

5TH IN SERIES

Encouragement to Encourage Others

Acts 15:36-41

1 John 1:7

1 Peter 2:9

John 8:12



We have three amazing passages before us this morning. We have the story of Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees and the Herodians, we have Paul thanking the Christians in Thessaloniki for their ministry and we have Paul speaking to Barnabas in the book of Acts, telling him that they should make a trip to visit all of the churches they had started to see how they were doing.

There is too much here! And although I elected to read a portion of Acts because the name of Barnabas pops up again, I thought that this passage might not be so germane to the subject of encouraging us to encourage each other. After all it looks like Paul is had it with John Mark and doesn't want to have him tag along because he had deserted them in Pamphylia for some reason. Barnabas pleads to let Mark come and finally Paul says, "No!" Barnabas didn't abandon Mark, but the exchange became so heated that Paul and Barnabas parted company. Barnabas and Mark sailed away to Cyprus and Paul took

Silas and they two of them did what Paul wanted to do.

I thought to myself . . . there is nothing very encouraging about this passage. These friends splitting like this. But a day or two later, I took the time to try and read further in Acts, and guess what I found, Paul embraced John Mark and wanted to have him back. Somehow, Barnabas had encouraged John Mark to the point that he was becoming a highly effective and beloved missionary in the church, so much so that Paul admired him and wanted to emulate John Mark's behavior. Even Paul wanted to abandon John Mark, Barnabas did not and I thought, that might have a thought or two worth considering. How can we hang in with people that much of the world tosses aside?

Paul, by the way does some remarkable things along the way, and I really don't want to throw him under the bus here. Even though he has some rough edges, he does have the presence of mind to continually thank others. Almost every

letter he writes has lots of thank you notes in it. They aren't as humorous as Jimmy Fallon's, but they are sincere and he seems to encourage every church he visits or writes by saying "Thank You."

Grace to you and peace. We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

I don't say Thank You to all of you nearly enough, and that should change because saying "Thank You" might encourage you to do more of what you do best and so well. Thank You for making this place a place of prayer and welcome. Thank You for the mission you do and Thank You for serving others even when you may not feel particularly appreciated.

Then, we get to this bothersome text where Jesus has his exchange. I thought about ignoring it, really.

Since, I've used the name of this dog before and loved it, about a real story, I thought I could incorporate the name into a fictitious tale. A woman made a phone call to the Presbyterian Church in town and asked to speak to the pastor. When he was on the line, between some light sobbing she asked if he'd be willing to officiate at the funeral of her beloved Doberman Pincer, "Fluffy" who had just died. "Oh, I can't do that, ma'am," he said. "Why don't you try the Baptist church or the Roman Catholic priest might be able to help?" "All right," she said, "but would you be so kind as to provide a little advice? How much should I pay him for doing the funeral – a thousand or two thousand?" "Just a minute ma'am," he said, "I didn't realize your Fluffy was a Presbyterian."

Before we get too far with the message this morning we're going to bump against hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is an age-old moral failing, that often has to do with greed, and it can be particularly egregious among religious leaders. The word

"Hypocrisy" comes from the Greek and it technically means playing a part on the stage. It usually refers to a false appearance of virtue – not practicing what you preach. Therefore, it's a particularly common failure among clergy, like me. It's also one of the main reasons cited by people for leaving congregations and abandoning their faith all together: "Those church people claim to be so good and pious, but in reality they're just the opposite. I can't stand being around hypocrites like that." Such criticism is often well deserved.

We're human, after all, and we don't always practice what we preach. Then, there are some matters which are complicated enough that we have to make tradeoffs or compromises that appear to be hypocritical. Some guidelines for pastors provide four suggestions:

- 1) Avoid absolutism, because it will inevitably get you into trouble.
- 2) Be as transparent as possible about your beliefs and actions, so you don't appear to be claiming one thing while actually doing something else.
- 3) Practice humility as a virtue.
- 4) Be especially careful in the high-risk areas of money, sex and power.

But, one day I was moved by a phrase from Ernie Campbell. Dr. Campbell had been the pastor of the renowned Riverside Church in New York City. He used to come to Princeton Seminary to teach a class or two. One Monday, when I was on the campus for a book club meeting he walked through the halls asking if there is someone who would play handball with him. Not many would, but I had my handball gloves in the car and that began an opportunity to play handball with Ernie on a number of Monday afternoons. So in 1988 after showering in the locker room he used a phrase during post handball play that has stuck with me ever since and topped that off with a poem. The phrase is "Tolerable Hypocrisy." The phrase oozed from a response to the question, "How will we ever enjoy other people without a tolerance for hypocrisy?"

Most pastors have heard in some form or other, "You know, the thing that puts me off about the church is that there are so many characters in it and among them are characters I don't much care to have as associates." And as much as that keeps us at arm's length, it is one of the few institutions that dare to be open and inviting saying, "Whosoever will may come." And some who come may not always be to our liking.

Please be patient with this confession for it is somewhat embarrassing to make. I have never been the pastor of a church in which I would have chosen all the members. But let me add to that, that I have never been the pastor of a church in which all of the members would have chosen me. So we get involved in what theologian Heidegger called the "thrown-ness" of life, we are in this strange mix that the Holy Spirit brings together under the Providence of God. "Let the wheat and the tares grow up together." A tolerance for hypocrisy is something we could use. We offer this reminder because intolerance for hypocrisy can breed its own hypocrisy.

I thought that this reminder might be helpful as we begin to enter into this passage that contains a familiar saying, even to non-believers particularly in the King James translation: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." It is the verse that stands out in our gospel reading this morning. It would be interesting to hear each of the potential candidates who are on the ballot in a couple of weeks give their own spin on this verse even though we are already growing weary of hearing myriad political robocalls.

Long before she became famous for chocolate Lady Godiva allegedly rode through the streets of Coventry England on horseback without benefit of clothing. Supposedly she made her famous ride so scandalously in exchange for her husband, Leofric, Earl of Mercia's promise to cut

taxes.¹ We can only hope that the current gaggle of candidates who make similar promises don't follow the example of Leofric and his famous wife Godiva.

Donna Bell, an IRS employee writes that she was working at her desk close to tax day, April 15, one year when an elderly woman approached her. The lady said she needed a thick stack of tax forms.

"Why so many?" asked Ms. Bell.

"My son is stationed overseas," she said. "He asked me to pick up forms for the soldiers on his base."

"You shouldn't have to do this," Ms. Bell told her. "It's the base commander's job to make sure that his troops have access to the forms they need."

"I know," said the woman. "I'm the base commander's mother."²

Most of us are sufficiently intimidated by the IRS and know better than to mess with the agency. There are mafia bosses doing jail time not for murder or mayhem but for failure to pay taxes on their ill-gotten gains.

Yes, it is a long time until April 15 and it might make you wonder why this passage is being read today. Would it not be better to have it read later? But, April 15 is also the day the Titanic sunk and the day Lincoln was shot. It is a day with problems no matter how we might look at it. Taxes are brought to our attention by the reporting of stump speeches most every day now. "How do we cut the national debt without raising taxes" or "If we increase taxes how do we make sure that those funds pay down the national debt?" or "How do we make sure that our tax money is not being used for frivolous pork

¹ William Hartston, *The Encyclopedia of Useless Information* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc.. 2007), p. 159.

² *America In Uniform*, <http://www.beliefnet.com>.

programs when there are important needs at stake?”

Similar questions were on the minds of people in Jesus’ time as well. What was worse for them was that taxation carried the sinister connotation that taxation was propping up Israel’s oppressors, the Romans. Taxes were not paid to Israel or Judah. Most tax money went directly to Rome. To occupied Jews this was offensive. They resented their hard earned money going to the treasury of the people who ruled over them.

To add insult to injury, the Roman tax could only be paid with a Roman coin. This coin had stamped on it the image of Caesar himself. The inscription on it read: “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest.” This coin with Caesar’s image violated the second commandment as far as the Jews were concerned, the commandment regarding the creation of graven images.

So the Pharisees and the Herodians, that is, those in league with Herod, thought they had a winning hand when they posed a question to Jesus about paying taxes to Rome. “Teacher,” they said hypocritically, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”

It was a no-win situation for Jesus, or so they thought. If he counseled against paying taxes, he would be in trouble with the Romans; if he spoke in favor of paying the tax, the common people would be enraged. His enemies would have him just where they wanted him.

But Jesus could see through their intent on posing the question. He said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

When his enemies heard this, Matthew tells us, they were amazed. So they left him and went away. “Render . . . unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.” What we render and to whom we render has been important to us ever since. It is important to those who pay great taxes and those who pay little and it was important to Tom Trivisi.

Tom was in his swimming trunks when he left the water’s edge in Ocean City, New Jersey and approached a young lady who was soaking up the sun’s rays on the beach that hot July day. Tom was carrying a towel and his trunks were covered in sand. His parents were at a distance and had told him to swim in front of the life guard and so he had wandered closer to be in front of the life guard stand. He politely asked this strange young lady in her two piece black and magenta swim suit, “Excuse me, do you believe in God?” She was surprised by the question but she shielded her eyes, lifted herself onto one elbow and said, “Why, yes, I do.” Then Tom asked “Do you go to church on Sunday?” Again, her answer was “Yes!” Then Tom wanted to know, “Do you read your Bible and pray?” She smiled and said, “Yes!” She was more curious than perturbed by this inquisition but she watched this big sigh of relief exhale from Tom Trivisi who had but one more question. “Would you please hold my dollar and keep it safe while I go in the ocean. My parents told me not to go in except in front of the life guard and you are a lot closer now. And she said, “Yes, I’ll keep your dollar safe.” And then Tom asked one last question, “And if the man with the ice cream sandwiches comes walking near here will you let me know?” And she nodded, “Yes.”

Tom Trivisi was straightforward and honest in his questions because he wanted to entrust to this young lady something valuable. The Pharisees

and Herodians are not being honest. They have no intent to entrust Jesus with anything. They are not looking for the answer to a question. They don't want someone to hold their dollar. They are looking for a way to get rid of this trouble making Nazarene Jesus.

The Pharisees were so angry it blinded them. Think for a moment about the ironies here: We know, because we live on this side of the resurrection, that Jesus was God. They thought he was demonic, an agent of Satan. We know that Jesus is the King of kings. They thought he wanted to be the King of Israel. We know that he was the Son of God. They thought he was simply Joseph and Mary's son. We know that Jesus has influenced the world for 2000 years. They thought his influence would end when he was condemned and punished.

It's a fascinating story. We look at the Pharisees and we shake our heads. How could they have been so wrong when the truth was standing right in front of them? I believe they were upset because Jesus held them accountable and exposed their hypocrisy. "Teacher, we know that you are sincere," they say to him, "and teach the way of God." Not for a moment did they believe in Jesus' sincerity. It was a set up. It was a way of putting him at ease before they stabbed him in the back. Tell us then, they continue, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?

We know what belongs to Caesar, don't we? We get information from the IRS each year reminding us what we owe to Caesar. But what about God? WHAT DO WE OWE GOD?

First of all, of course, we owe God our money. This church would not be here if you did not believe in giving God your money. Whether you give God a tithe, 10 percent, or even a fraction of that, you and I understand that giving is part of our responsibility as followers of Christ.

We owe money to our state and beyond because we drive on its roads. Somebody has to pay for the highways. Somebody has to pay for our

schools, our military and all the benefits of a free and affluent land. In much the same way we give to God in order that the Gospel may be proclaimed and that future generations may have the same spiritual benefits that we enjoy.

Mark Sanborn is a well-known writer and motivational speaker. In one of his books, he tells about a friend of his, now deceased, who was well-known in business circles. His name was Charlie "Tremendous" Jones. Some of you know about this dynamic sales personality. Charlie "Tremendous" Jones died in October of 2009 and there was quite a remarkable "Homecoming Celebration" held in his behalf. You can view that moving service in full on the Internet.

Charlie Jones had a "tremendous" attitude about life. Mark Sanborn called Charlie "Tremendous" Jones one of the most philanthropic people he knew. Throughout his life, Sanborn says, Charlie Jones gave lavishly of his time and money. So Mark Sanborn was surprised when Charlie Jones announced to him and his other friends, "I've given up on giving." Says Sanborn, "There had to be more to the story, we knew." What would cause one of the most giving people on earth to give up on giving?

Charlie "Tremendous" Jones explained why he had given up on giving like this: "Everything I have," he said, "my life, my potential, my time was given to me. I've decided to spend the rest of my life returning."³

Charlie was giving up on giving because he realized he hadn't been truly giving in the first place. How can you give what you do not own? He realized that he wasn't really GIVING to God. He was RETURNING to God what was God's already.

I believe most of us understand that, but it is good to be reminded. A church like ours couldn't survive very long if people just gave to God

³ *You Don't Need a Title to Be a Leader* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2006), p. 85.

when they felt their pastor inspired them to do. There are some people who give according to whether they like the pastor or whether they approve or disapprove of what the denomination is doing. I know that this begins meddling with the hypocrisy thing, doesn't it? The church of Christ is more dependent on disciples of Jesus who give because they recognize that all of life is a gift from a loving God, and we are simply returning a portion of what God has bestowed on us.

The second thing we owe God is our joyful service. I say joyful service because the people who serve God best don't think of it as a duty, but as a privilege. For them service is a natural response to God's goodness.

The editorial staff of a Sunday magazine at one time created a "Faith in Life" award. This was their way of increasing their readership and at the same time recognizing those who best demonstrated their faith in daily living. The readers were encouraged to submit letters of nomination to the paper telling stories of those persons who best lived their faith in their daily lives.

A large number of the nominating letters that came in mentioned people who either (1) had attended church regularly for years; (2) had given a sizable amount of money to their church or favorite charity; or (3) had done both. Many of the letters included newspaper clippings that showed the dedication of the person who was being nominated for the award.

Some folks were surprised when the winner was announced. His letter of nomination had arrived at the paper written in crayon with no newspaper clippings attached. The letter read like this: "Anthony is a plumber. He helped some people fix up a house for my friend's family because their first house burned down. He also visits my grandmother in the nursing home and makes her happy with his stories and his harmonica playing. He is a lot like Jesus. I hope he wins. But if he doesn't it won't matter. He will still be

the same good old Anthony." And it was signed, "Love, Anne."⁴

I like that. He "makes [my grandmother] happy with his stories and his harmonica playing. He is a lot like Jesus." Haven't you known people through the years like Anthony the plumber? Some are members of this church. They take being a good neighbor seriously. They are continually doing good things for others. Sometimes their behavior is loved and appreciated, but not broadcast or well known. However, I think that it is their daily living that provides more encouragement to me than anything else. It is their daily walk that encourages me to encourage others.

Anthony is like Arnold Billie. For more than a quarter of a century, Billie was a rural mail carrier in southern New Jersey. His daily route took him sixty-three miles through two counties and five municipalities. Mr. Billie did more than deliver the mail. He provided "personal service." Anything a person might need to purchase from the post office, Mr. Billie provided stamps, money orders, pickup service. All a customer needed to do was leave the flag up on their mailbox.

One elderly woman had trouble starting her lawn mower, so whenever she wanted to use it, she would simply leave it by her mailbox, raise the flag, and when Mr. Billie came by, he would start it for her! Mr. Billie gave a new definition to the phrase "public servant."⁵

There ought to be a special place in heaven for people like Anthony the plumber and Arnold Billie. There probably is. These are people who live out their faith in a wonderful way. Thank God for them. What do we owe God? We owe God our money. We owe God our joyful service.

⁴ Rev. Richard J. Fairchild,
<http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/c-or32sesn.php>.

⁵ *God's Little Devotional Book* (Tulsa: Honor Books, Inc., 1973), p. 229.

But the most important thing we owe God is, of course, ourselves. We need to understand this. More important than our material possessions, more important than our acts of neighborliness, is that we have dedicated ourselves whole-heartedly to God.

image were we created? God's. Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's. In other words, as ones created in the image of God, we owe God everything we are and everything we hope to be.

Whose image was engraved on the Roman coins? That's easy to answer Caesar's. In whose

Matthew 22:15-22

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.

Acts 15:36-41

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.³⁸ But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work.³⁹ The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.⁴⁰ But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord.⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit,⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to

God from idols, to serve a living and true God,¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

If I Had a Million Pounds
Poem given to me by Dr. Ernest Campbell

Whose image was engraved on the Roman coins? Caesar's. In whose image were we created? God's!
"Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's."

And in our rendering have a bit more tolerance for hypocrisy - we render to God imperfectly - for imperfect people in a less than perfect world. Would we have it any other way? G. Studdert Kennedy gave us this poem to Ernest Campbell years ago. He gave it to me and so I pass it along to you.

*If I had a million pounds
I'd buy me a perfect island home
Sweet set in a southern sea.
And there would I build a paradise
For the heart of my love and me.
I'd plant me a perfect garden there,
One that my dream-soul knows,
And the years would flow
As the petals grow
That flamed to a perfect rose.
I'd build me a perfect temple there
A shrine where my Christ
might dwell;
And then would I wake
To find my soul
Damned deep in a perfect hell.*