



October 18, 2020

The 20th Sunday of Pentecost

The Rev. Emily Williams Guffey, Rector

Readings: Exodus 33:12-23, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Gospel: Matthew 22: 15-22

*"Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes  
Five hundred twenty-five thousand moments so dear  
Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes  
How do you measure, measure a year?  
In daylight, in sunsets  
In midnights, in cups of coffee  
In inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife  
In five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes  
How do you measure, measure our lives?"*

*How about love?  
Measure in love.*

*Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes  
How do you measure the life of a woman or a man?  
In truth that she learned  
Or in times that he cried  
In bridges that he burned  
Or in the way that she died?"*

I am quoting here, of course, "*Seasons of Love*," a song from Jonathan Larson's 1996 musical, "*Rent*," an adaptation of *La Bohème* in which, among many other things, a group of friends in New York City endures many challenges, are acquainted with grief and poverty and also share in joy and commit themselves day in and day out to being there for one another.

My friends, these days, well we may not be able to remember what day it is. It is Sunday, October 18. We may not have ways to count the days, to differentiate one day from another. We may have lost our bearings on how to measure value and progress and connection in our lives. But we can still measure our lives and our energies and our hearts in love...in the currency of love.

Our Gospel reading today is a famous one in which some authorities corner Jesus with a trick question. In their preamble to their famous trick question, they flatter Jesus, insincerely, saying that, *"Well, Jesus, you show no partiality, just as God shows no partiality."* [That phrase about "showing partiality" is literally, in the Greek, you do not regard the face of anyone. Isn't that interesting? It was a common metaphor at that time for showing partiality, whether or not you regarded the face of another].

And then, of course, comes the trick question which has resounded through the centuries:

*Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?*

Now, one author provides some context for this, saying that the Roman tax referenced here was levied annually on harvests and personal property and determined by the census. It was administered by Jewish authorities, but it put heavy economic burdens on the impoverished residents of First Century Palestine. And on at least one occasion, just years before this, the census provoked a revolt against Rome.

So, times were tense.

And the way the trick question was going to work was that if Jesus answered "yes," then he would risk alienating the oppressed Jews of Palestine, but if he answered "no," then he could be accused of sedition.

Brilliantly and famously, Jesus refuses to do either. He refuses to be pinned into an either-or and in his answer he shows what is truly lawful. He points to the law of God. He points to the authority of God which is the true authority.

Before answering, Jesus asks *"Does anybody have a coin?"* And, lo and behold, someone does. He is presented with a Roman denarius which bears the likeness of Caesar who was, of course, the ruler and was thought to be a divine authority.

Jesus answers, *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's."*

Jesus' response may provoke some questions in us. Such as, well, what does belong to Caesar? What belongs to the governors and authorities in our lives? What belongs to the powers that be and what belongs to God? How do we know? How do we tell the difference? And who decides? Do we have any say in this, anyway?

Some of the earliest Christian theologians looked to the image on the coin and answered that the coin, which bears the image of Caesar, logically then, belong to Caesar.

What then bears the image of God? We know from the creation account that we, humans, bear the image of God. Is God's face upon us?

In the story from Exodus today, God refuses to show God's face to Moses, despite Moses' question, *"Please, show me your face."* Mostly Moses is imploring

God to be with him, to remain with him. And, in that, God is faithful. And God does accompany Moses, and God accompanies each one of us. Though we cannot see God's face, as such, we know and we trust in God's promise that God is right here, with us. And we see reflections of God's face in one another.

What then do we do?

Might it be that we ourselves are the currency that God is interested in?

How can we give ourselves to God?

How can we bear one another up in love?

About this metaphor of currency, Sam Wells, the vicar of St. Martin in the Fields, noted that in Jesus' time, Jews in the Roman Empire had to be able to change currency.

The problem, Wells says, with we Christians today is that we have forgotten our own currency which is what buys things that last forever. We have tended to operate entirely in the world's currency of things that last for a limited time.

If I am honest with myself, when I think of the currency and energy in my life, when I think about how I think about resources that I have and that we have, if I am honest I'll say that the first emotion that I think of is anxiety. Anxiety about what is going to happen next. Anxiety..is there enough? Anxiety...what will happen?

And put my energy into that anxiety. And then that anxiety feeds back to me more anxiety.

Am I operating then in a currency of anxiety? There is a currency of anxiety at hand. There are currencies of fear. Currencies, of course, of energy and exhaustion

What currencies do we, as Christians, need to take into our hands?

Jesus suggests that that currency is one of love.

For what is the law to which he points? What is the law? "To love God with our whole heart, our whole mind, our soul and our strength. To love God with everything that we have and with all that we are. And the second part of the law is just like it which is to love our neighbors as ourselves. To love one another as God loves us. And to spend our energies of our heart and soul and mind and strength in bearing one another up...in caring and reaching out in strength and hope.

How might we measure our lives in currencies of hope, of faith and of love? And if those currencies seem like they are in short supply, and I know that feeling, let us consider how much we are spending in anxiety and in fear...and look to God and look to one another for the face of God.

As Jonathan Larson concludes the song:

*"It is time now to sing out  
The story never ends  
Remember the love."*

AMEN