

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
October 16, 2011

IN GOD WE TRUST?
Why are you putting me to the test?
Matthew 22:18

Well. There is indeed some irony in this gospel text this morning. Not by this preacher's choosing by any means. I have the lectionary to thank....or not....for the paradoxical relevance of these readings in the midst of a struggling economy, ongoing political filibustering, and character assassinations and the growing persistence of Occupy Wall Street protesters.

This past week, NY Times columnist Paul Krugman wrote: "It remains to be seen whether these protests will change America's direction. Yet, the protests have already elicited a remarkably hysterical reaction from Wall Street, the super rich in general, and politicians and pundits who reliably serve the interests of the wealthiest hundredth of a percent." Needless to say the protesters have been denounced as mobs, accused of waging class warfare and even called anti-American. Whether you agree with him or not, Krugman says "that the way to understand all of this is to realize that it's part of a broader syndrome, in which wealthy Americans who benefit hugely from a system rigged in their favor react with hysteria to anyone who points out how rigged the system is." "Yet," boldly writes Krugman, "they have paid no price. Taxpayers bailed out their institutions with few strings attached. And they still benefit from tax loopholes."

In the United States of America, we are certainly quite familiar with disagreements around the question of paying taxes, our current civic discourse and unrest as a clear example.

And most ironically, as we can see in the gospel reading today, those same disputes could be heard in first century Palestine and for many of the same reasons. The Pharisees and the Herodians, with the kind of forced geniality bred by collusion, are trying to entrap Jesus into disclosing something about himself that will clinch their attempts to indict him. They seem smug about using a coin – a denarius – to draw him into the harsh light of political partisanship, where they think they will peg him as either collaborator or rebel. Given their divided loyalties, it is unlikely that anything could have caused the Pharisees and Herodians to cooperate, except their mutual desire to see Jesus removed from the scene. They posed the question: "is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" The Pharisees hoped that Jesus would support paying taxes to Caesar so he would be viewed as a Roman sympathizer. The Herodians hoped he would oppose it so they could accuse him of treason against Rome. No matter how he answered, they had him trapped. But as the narrative stories of the Christian gospels often illustrate, Jesus again deftly transfigures this challenge into a theological question, and uses it to disclose something instead about them – and us. He widens the question so that it has little to do with politics and nothing to do with the threat of arrest. Everyone has to decide he says. He reconfigures the challenge around a question he intimates but never verbalizes. What is it that bears God's image? "No one can serve two masters" the narrative

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suggests earlier in this same gospel of Matthew. None of us is exempt from choosing. What belongs to whom?

The response Jesus gave as illustrated in our text this morning was as confounding and compelling today as it was in the first century: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." Scholars and commentaries have suggested that we have wanted to hear Jesus describing two parallel duties that can be discharged simultaneously, so as to preserve our good standing as citizens of both civic and faith based communities. There is a place for everything, and everything has its place. However, as one of my resources put it: Jesus is testing, not tidying. He is not sketching parallel responsibilities but a radical antithesis. Caesar can stamp his picture and pedigree far and wide, but he cannot come near the true commerce that animates us. So Caesar will get many or most of the coins and be flattered by how well his likeness is rendered in the medium of cold hard cash. What is rendered to God is whatever bears the divine image. Every life is marked with that inscription, an icon of the One who is its source and destination. Caesar's interest in the well being of his subjects stops abruptly at the point where his power over their livelihood is threatened. Does that sound familiar? The theological claim Jesus makes about God's interest has nothing to do with power. The God to whom we render our days is the God described by the prophet Isaiah in our first reading, the God to a people in exile. It is a curious statement in this text that God creates all things, light and darkness, weal and woe. If God uses Cyrus for good without his knowledge, how might God use any of us in the same way?

For a people languishing in exile, as it seems for many of us and our fellow citizens today, and those throughout the globe, it might be welcome news that God is yet mysteriously at work in the throes of the confidence we have lost in the institutions that have sustained us, both religious and political. We might not be able to discern precisely how God is working in the complexity of the world's current events, but we can insist with Isaiah that God is indeed working in the midst of it. As Isaiah would remind us when we do catch a glimpse of God's mysterious relevance and presence, it might just surprise us.

Some of you may remember The Rev. Dr. Donna Schaper, who was with us for a short time during her sabbatical this past winter and preached twice in Memorial Church for University Public Worship. Now back to her community as senior minister of Judson Memorial Church in NYC, she recently wrote a piece for the Huffington Post called *Occupy Wall Street, The Golden Calf and The New Idolatry*. I think it is quite illuminating and relevant to share some of it with you this morning to conclude.

Here's how Donna describes it:

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“When the paper mache golden calf arrived at the church, it looked ever so much like the Wall Street Bull. I am not secretly cursing. Our choir director and one of our ministers carried it on their shoulders from its rented van into Judson Memorial on Saturday night. What surprised them was how many people in the open bars recognized it immediately. Why, that is the golden calf. You know, from the Bible. Someone who was inspired by the actions of Occupy Wall Street and wanted to lend spiritual and biblical support made the golden calf. Donna recounts that they put it on their altar at Judson Memorial and then carried it down to Wall St. last Sunday to feature it in their multifaith service. (Incidentally, the Calf returned to Wall St. this weekend for the protests there.)

When the calf arrived in their empty sanctuary last Saturday night, about a dozen gathered to greet it. They were moved to pray after the artist came to humbly express why he built it. They took turns reading Exodus 32, verse by verse. They knew where to find the golden calf story in the Bible wrote Schaper, but had rarely heard it in the context of a paper mache built into 50 pounds of calf. They started with verse 1 - how the Exodus people were disappointed with the same Moses who had taken them out of the wilderness. Then Aaron was summoned to leadership and plotted an overthrow of Moses by building a new altar, a golden calf, made from earrings of the people and had a big party in front of their handmade idol. You might know the rest – Moses came back and destroyed the calf, begged God to repent of God’s wrath against the people for their idolatry.

Last Sunday, four men carried the calf on their shoulders, looking more like pallbearers in a street funeral than anything else. It was hot. How they walked the two miles with the 50-pound paper mache calf is a matter of physics. But why they did it, reflects Schaper, is a matter of spirit. They suited up so reporters would not call them hippies. There is nothing wrong with hippies except that people use them to stay distant from the Occupation Wall Street’s general and universal message. They wanted to look like the Wall Street they protested. They marched and carried because they know what idolatry is. It is the replacement of a false God for a better one. We all know how much we have internalized capitalism writes Schaper. We all know our distance from the truth. The 99% don’t have an enemy in the 1% so much as a need to bring money in line with human values. Our multifaith service went for the basics of our many faiths, the golden rule which is so distanced from and by the golden calf.”

Schaper concludes by saying: “We all know how little Sabbath we keep, how frequently we let other people tell us our value, our place, our position. We all know how much we have let Wall St. control the conversation, alerting us that the market is up or down. We brought the calf to Wall St. to confess our allegiance to false Gods and to announce that something was dying for us. That death is our own belief in the sacred calf of the Wall St. picture of the universe. The mike check was just the beginning of a new conversation, between and among people, about what is really

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important. What is important is people owning our own times, our own tongues, our own labor, our own worth. What is dead is Wall Street's control of the conversation and us."

What this surprising relevance of God illustrates to me is that when our conscience is tapped the passage about rendering unto Caesar and rendering unto God takes on real meaning. As illustrated in Jesus own reply to his challengers, the relation of faith to civil authority is called to account. How deftly he is able to change the conversation. The compassion for others and the willingness to speak out against deadly systems sets us on a path to see a markedly different future for ourselves and those around us. It is a restless, forward way of looking that is the product of our commerce, the taproot of our politics. All of us have fine lines to walk in negotiating the various kinds of commerce that fill our days. Most of us are collaborators some of the time, subversives some of the time. There is comfort and hope in Jesus' own refusal to make the conundrum of daily rendering into an easy question.

The question of what is truly lawful may perhaps be answered by yet looking forward to Jesus teaching on the greatest of the commandments, which grounds all of his debates with religious leaders. "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Am, I, are we ready to change, to control a new conversation?

Notes:

Paul Krugman, Panic of the Plutocrats, New York Times, October 9, 2011.

Donna Schaper, Occupy Wall Street, The Golden Calf and the New Idolatry, Huffington Post, October 11, 2011.