

20th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 24 – Year A – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony – 10.18.20
Isaiah 44:24-45:7, Psalm 96: 1-13, 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10, Matthew 22: 15-22

One of the often quoted descriptions of the theology of Episcopal Church is that of a three-legged stool. How many of you have ever seen a three-legged stool? At one time they were quite common, now not quite so much. My grandparents were dairy farmers when milking was done by hand morning and night. I remember seeing the three-legged stool my grandmother sat on as she milked the cows. The virtue of the three-legged stool both in reality and in theology is its great stability.

Scripture, tradition and reason our theological three-legged stool is what sets us apart from other Christian denominations. Over the centuries the image has provided great stability in how we determine how we God calls us to live the two states in which we reside. It has been said that each of us has dual citizenship. We are citizens of a nation by birth or naturalization and we are citizens of the Kingdom of God by baptism.

It is this dual citizenship that the Pharisees and Herodians sought to use to corner Jesus. In asking about whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar the opponents of Jesus thought they had cleverly put him in a “no win” situation. If he advocated the payment of taxes to the Romans he was in danger of alienating his Jewish followers, and if he advised against the payment of taxes he would bring down the wrath of the Roman state on the community. But, as he so often did, Jesus turned the question upside down and widened it to a great truth.

We all have to make decisions in our lives which sometimes seem on the surface to be contradictory, no win situations. Do we do this or that, knowing we will have to accept the consequences of our decisions? While I would not say to you that Jesus was an Episcopalian, his answer was much in the manner of scripture, tradition and reason.

The Hebrew scripture from the time of Moses had called for the Jews to give back to God the first fruits of their labor and harvest. The first-born son, the first, portion of grain, wine, the first born of all the livestock. All of these first fruits, were to be given back to God because all that existed belonged to the God who had created everything and given it as a free gift to human beings. Traditionally these contributions in kind were used to support the temple ministry and to supply the needs of widows and orphans in the community. There was a real and concrete tie between what was produced and what was given back to God for God’s use. With urbanization, even in the early centuries, coinage came into use to represent the labor and goods of an individual. It was useful to use coins that were received when the goods were sold to another.

When Jesus was approached by the Pharisee’s and Herodians with their question about payment, Jesus answered in a very reasonable way. He asked them about image. Image has always been important in identifying ownership. Think of logos. When you see the “golden arches” you know that particular place is a MacDonald’s. The image on the denarius, the coin of Palestine, was that of the ruler of Rome, at the time Tiberius Caesar. The inscription that accompanied the image named the emperor divine.

What Jesus was doing was not simply getting out of the tight corner with a clever answer, but actually challenging the religious leaders and his followers to decide. This was not a simple outline of parallel duties, to the government and to God, but a test of our understanding of God as creator.

In the story of creation contained in Genesis we are told that “God created humankind in God’s image...male and female God created them.” We bear the imprint, the image of God in our very life. Jesus tells those around him to give to the emperor the things that are the emperor those coins which bear his image, cold, hard metal with no life. He then tells those who are listening to give to God those things which bear God’s image. In truth what we are called to give back to God is ourselves. Life was given by God as a gift to us to have and to use. When Jesus tells the crowds and the religious leaders that they have a duty to give to God what bears God’s image, the word give is literally to give back. It is a recognition that all that we are and all that we have are gifts of the creator and are ours to use but not to ultimately own.

There is another ‘three-legged’ stool in our Episcopal tradition, that of time, talent and treasure. These too are all gifts of God given freely to us for our use. It is in our use of time, talent and treasure that we give back “ourselves” to God. We are called to give back to God that which is God’s in the first place. Not only our treasure, our money, but our time and our talent.

In the last several months it has been difficult to see the impact of the giving back of time and talent that has continued at St. Augustine’s. There are many examples of people in this community quietly and faithfully given back their time and their talents as a gift to God and to this place. The Vestry, 6 women and men plus a clerk and treasurer have been meeting remotely twice a month using their time and talent to guide us. The staff, our music director, bookkeeper, and parish administrator have kept things running smoothly as we negotiate the often confusing requirements of being a community in this time. There are all of you, volunteers everyone, altar guild, counters, ushers, greeters, those offering lectionary study, conversations and spiritual companionship, and those who made or are making possible the continuation of our traditions, like the Blessing of the Animals, and the Holiday Market and the Light, and especially those who have continued to pray for St. Augustine’s and for its people. The danger of making a list is that someone will be left out. To all you who have continued to minister in whatever way you are called, thank you. Scripture, Tradition and Reason, Time Talent and Treasure, two three-legged stools which provide the blessings of God and the stability of faith now and always.