

### God's

Today we have celebrated the pipe organ. I would also like to take a moment to celebrate our fine organist, Margaret Budd...In my humble opinion, the thing that makes Margaret an outstanding church organist is not her considerable technical skill on the organ, it is her understanding that, as a church musician, *she* is also an instrument. She is God's instrument.

Author Annie Dillard tells the story of an explorer coming over a ridge in Alaska and looking down from a distance on two Inuit girls sitting cross-legged on the ground. At first glance they appeared to be kissing, but then the explorer realized that they were making a low, unearthly music by blowing on each others vocal cords. From this strange scene Dillard concludes, "We are played on like a pipe, our breath is not our own." That, in short, is what today's sermon is about. Let us pray...

I don't know if you have heard the news, but our apparently economy is experiencing some trouble. This is a time of high anxiety for many. How, when, and to what extent this economic crisis will affect individuals is not yet clear. Many are already experiencing the effects, finding it hard to receive credit, seeing their investments tumble, and retirement savings shrink. Retail sales have dropped. But perhaps the hardest hit to this point has been the non-profit organizations. Donations have come to a crashing halt for many charitable organizations. Some are already cutting back services. Others are contemplating closing their doors. Some cannot afford to pay their employees the modest paychecks they are due.

In the midst of all of this, fall is what is stewardship season for many congregations; that time of year when the church leadership solicits pledges from its members and sets the budget for the following year. The good news for us at RPPC is that we ran our campaign in the spring and have already set our budget. The not so good news is that we are running a sizable deficit. But still, I feel sympathy for my colleagues and their churches that are running pledge campaigns during this tumultuous time. I teased one such colleague recently and said how glad I was that we ran our fiscal year July to July. He was not amused!

The fear is that during uncertain financial times people instinctively hold on to what they have, be it a lot or a little. I am certainly no economist, but that is a problem for a system based upon the flow of currency from one hand to another. Values start to plummet in order to convince people to let the currency flow, but the plummeting values make the economy more unstable and add to the anxiety, hence people tend to hold on even tighter to what they have. How do we break this cycle and get the currency flowing again that seems to be one of the main questions?

I have no idea. As I said, I am not an economist. I really have no business talking about it. Jesus probably had no business talking about economics either, but it didn't stop the Pharisees and Herodians from asking him about their currency. In fact, Matthew tells us it is their intention to trap him. They start off with compliments, praising his character and his ability to teach God's ways, then they spring their trap: So tell us, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?

Here is how one commentator describes the bind that this question puts Jesus in: “For a quarter of a century, Jews has been forced to pay, in Roman currency, a head tax to Roman government. Some Jews rested easy with Roman rule and supported the tax (probably including the Herodians), but most of the citizens of Judah reacted to the idea of paying money to the pagan emperor with distaste ranging from mild provocation to seething insurrection...So, to raise the question of paying taxes to the emperor was to pull the scab off a political and theological wound...If Jesus were to say ‘No,’ then the Roman government would swiftly move in on him as a dangerous political agitator. On the other hand, if Jesus were to reply ‘Yes,’ then he would lose credibility with many of the people, who paid the tax but who did so only begrudgingly.”

Jesus is no dummy. He recognizes the trap and calls his accusers on it. There are two ways to understand what happens next. The first is that Jesus, like a sly politician, uses his cunning to slip out of their trap and simply avoids making any statement that would get him in trouble. The other is that Jesus flips the game around on those who are trying to corner him as either a hypocrite or a zealot. Instead of getting played, Jesus plays them. Jesus asks whose image is on the currency, and before the accusers even think about it, they pull money out of their pockets and expose their own deception and hypocrisy. They are the ones carrying Caesar’s money around, not Jesus. They are the ones who already bought into the emperor’s system and so when Jesus finally answers their question, “give to the emperors what is the emperor’s, but give to God what is God’s” they realize their error of judgment: they

forgot that they belong to God, that God's image is imprinted on their very being. As Joseph Donders writes,

*God coined us in God's image...  
 We are God's money,  
 and we should be spent.  
 Money should circulate,  
 we should circulate;  
 Money should go from hand to hand,  
 We should go from hand to hand;  
 Money should be used,  
 We should be used;  
 Money is going to be worn;  
 We should be going to be worn.  
 We should be spent,  
 We are coins,  
 God is trying to use us,  
 To pay off debts,  
 To pay off debts we owe to each other  
 Here on earth  
 Let us risk being used,  
 And we will be increased,  
 And the end will be glory.*

Could it be that we are God's currency...that we have God's image imprinted on our very being...that nothing can be the emperor's, or ours for that matter, without first being God's...that our breath is not our own...that we are an instrument to be played upon...that we are God's? And if so, how do we get flowing? How will you, how will we give God what is God's?

Let us pray: *You have loved us with an everlasting love, O God. You have called us by name and we are yours. Melt us, mold us, fill us and use us for your purposes. Spend us. Wear us out in loving service. Use us to pay off our debts to one another here on earth, that others may see your image clearly imprinted on our lives, that Jesus' way may show in us, that your love may flow freely. Amen.*