

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**

**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – October 22, 2017**

**Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister**

**Matthew 22:15-22 & Thomas 100 (The Five Gospels)**

<https://www.treehugger.com/cleaning-organizing/swedish-death-cleaning-new-decluttering-trend.html>

**FOR REFLECTION**

**“It is preoccupation with possessions, more than anything else, that prevents us from living freely and nobly.”**

- Bertrand Russell, British Philosopher (1872-1970)

**Dostadning**

In one form or another, this phrase is in five of the known Gospels:

**“Pay the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and God what belongs to God!”**

It is designated **red** by the Jesus Seminar meaning they believe these are words that originated with Jesus.

The exact context for how Jesus comes to say this is changed in each one, but that line is the same. In each gospel, someone is trying to trick or entrap Jesus – and in Matthew the question is very specific:

“So tell us what you think:

Is it permissible to pay the **poll tax** to the Roman emperor or not?”

The tax denoted in the text was a specific tax... It was a **poll tax**... instituted in A.D. 6. A census taken at that time (cf. Lk. 2:2) to determine the resources of the Jews provoked the wrath of the country. Judas of Galilee led a revolt (Acts 5:37), [and some amount of rioting], which was suppressed only with some difficulty. Many scholars date the origin of the **Zealot party** and movement to this incident.

- Willard Swartley, Greek Testament scholar

The Jewish Encyclopedia says of the Zealots:

The taking of the census by Quirinus, the Roman procurator, for the purpose of taxation was regarded as a sign of Roman enslavement; and the Zealots' call for stubborn resistance to the oppressor was responded to enthusiastically.

According to Luke, at his trial before Pontius Pilate (Luke 23:1-4), Jesus was accused of promoting resistance to Caesar's tax.

Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. 2 And they began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Render\\_unto\\_Caesar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Render_unto_Caesar)

So, what these people are trying to do is to link Jesus to the Zealot movement and hold it against him. Here's what the scholars of the Jesus Seminar say about Jesus' response:

Jesus' response is a humorous bit of repartee. He misleads his interlocutors by pointing to the emperor's image and name on the coin, but he then ignores that point, and suggests they **learn to tell the difference between the claims of the emperor and the claims of God**. He responds to the question without answering it; he turns the question back on his interrogators, just as he often does in telling a parable without a conclusion. His audience is supposed to supply the answer themselves. **In addition, he probably slipped the coin into his purse while they were haggling over what he had told them.**

The Five Gospels p.526

I love that image of Jesus slipping the coin into his purse – an image Thomas may have added language to with: "...and give me what is mine."

Funny how taxes are STILL the issue of the day in 2017. 45 refuses to release his tax returns; it's likely he hasn't paid any taxes for at least 20 years – according to parts of leaked documents. Tax reform is a huge item on the GOP platform and versions are under debate right now. The tug-of-war between those who believe corporations should be relieved of their tax burden so they can flourish – and those who believe corporations (along with the wealthy) should pay their fair share so that society can flourish – continues.

We could go back through history to find conflicts over taxes at the heart of most civilizations. The Boston Tea Party comes to mind – as the current Tea Party continues the fight.

However, from what we know about the real Jesus – he didn't really answer the question. He left his entrapment team to answer a deeper question for themselves.

- How do YOU determine the claims of the government vs. the claims of God?

And this question leads to spiritual questions that can have a huge impact on how we live our lives:

- How much do we need to make sure we do not become a burden on others – and how much should we share with society to lift the burdens of other.
- How do we relate to our possessions – our bank accounts – our retirement accounts?
- How do we balance our needs and our wants responsibly?
- How do we balance our needs and the needs of others with some amount of compassion?

- How does our attachment to “stuff” clutter and confuse and block our life path?
- How does our attachment to stuff impact those closest to us – especially once we have “shuffled off this mortal coil” and taken none of this with us?

By American standards, John and I live a modest middle-class lifestyle. But our house is extremely cluttered with inherited furniture and dishes and objects of emotional value. Most of this came from grandparents and parents who downsized and/or died. When my mom moved to assisted living quarters, her four children cleaned out her apartment – leaving as a donation to her facility her wedding china and a serious amount of furniture that none of us had room or desire for. I still ended up taking home her antiques and quilts and some books and photos and other nonsense. I have 10 boxes of books and papers from my grandmother in the basement yet to go through. Don't even get me started on my own boxes in the garage - boxes of books and letters and music and photos and files and childhood mementos from 62 years of archival instincts and the inability to let go...

None of this serves our needs or the needs of the poor – sitting in our house. And imagine the enormous task this would leave in John's and Peter's hands if they had to deal with it after my demise?

According to reputable news sources, there is a trend among “Millennials” to refuse to take possession of inherited items from their “Boomer” parents.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/18/your-money/aging-parents-with-lots-of-stuff-and-children-who-dont-want-it.html>

They don't want china and silver and delicate glass heirlooms and heavy old dressers and worn even if valuable rugs. They want IKEA furniture and dishes that match and can be replaced easily when broken.

We might dismiss all of this as a First World problem. But it relates directly to an ALL World problem – as hoarding and accumulating by anyone reduces the amount of wealth circulating and available to others. Knowing this, John and I began our life together as members of a Voluntary Simplicity Group – keeping each other accountable as we simplified, decluttered and made choices that were greener, economically just and closer to our value systems.

As our accountability group dispersed – and our families lost elder members – our commitment to simplicity took a dive. So, imagine my delight when I read an article about "dostadning" – a Swedish practice called “Death Cleaning.”

In Swedish, the word... "dostadning"...refers to the act of slowly and steadily decluttering as the years go by, ideally beginning in your fifties (or at any point in life) and going until the day you kick the bucket. The ultimate purpose of death cleaning is to minimize the amount of stuff, especially meaningless clutter, that you leave behind for others to deal with.

<https://www.treehugger.com/cleaning-organizing/swedish-death-cleaning-new-decluttering-trend.html>

What struck me is that my father has been doing this over the last several decades. He has made sure that books and other materials from the Civil Rights Movement, the Farmworker Movement, the Vietnam War Resistance have gotten to archival collections where scholars can access them. He has cleaned out closets and much of his garage – including making sure all of his kids have taken what they want of their childhood memorabilia. He and I have been working on digitizing thousands of family photos – again for accessibility as well as preservation – and, eventually, the option to discard the physical boxes.

What also struck me is that I've been doing this with and for churches for 30 years. Part of my work as an Interim Minister has been culling church libraries of books that are outdated or never-read, archiving financial and other records, getting left-over sale and craft items out of closets, unloading unused choir robes – and getting un-needed objects to a place where they might be useful. In fact, we've been doing that same thing here – in the wake of selling the building. We cleaned out two storage compartments – we continue to take and send things to various archives where historians can access the volumes of information previously hidden in the basement. It is a practice that has allowed us to be lighter on our feet and more focused on community.

What I've been able to help OTHERS do I find extremely difficult to do for myself. And I take inspiration from the Swedish tradition of “death cleaning” – seeing this as an opportunity to engage in a spiritual practice – done slowly over time – generating a habit that benefits everyone – those I know and love – and those who are the recipients of my extraneous possessions.

God's claims on my life are better served if I am not weighted down by possessions. Social needs are better met if I can transfer some of my immovable wealth back into the social safety net – which, yes, involves paying my share of taxes – and donating more to appropriate charities and movements.

And my child and yet unborn grandchildren will thank me – perhaps even bless me – for cleaning up my own mess so they won't have to.

May God help me be a blessing and make it so.

## Matthew 22:15-22 (The Five Gospels)

15 Then the Pharisees went and conferred on how to entrap him with a riddle. 16 And they send their disciples to him along with the Herodians to say, “Teacher, we know that you are honest and that you teach God’s way forthrightly, and are impartial, because you pay no attention to appearances. 17 So tell us what you think: Is it permissible to pay the poll tax to the Roman emperor or not?”

18 Jesus knew how devious they were, and said, “Why do you provoke me, you pious frauds? 19 Let me see the coin used to pay the poll tax.” And they handed him a silver coin.

20 And he says to them, “Whose picture is this? Whose name is on it?”

21 They say to him, “The emperor’s.” Then he says to them, **“Pay the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and God what belongs to God!”**

22 Upon hearing his reply, they were dumbfounded. And they withdrew from him and went away.

## Thomas 100 (The Five Gospels)

1 They showed Jesus a gold coin and said to him, “The Roman emperor’s people demand taxes from us.”

2 He said to them, **“Give the emperor what belongs to the emperor, 3 give God what belongs to God, 4 and give me what is mine.”**

\*\*\*

The taxes imposed on Judaea by Rome had led to riots. New Testament scholar Willard Swartley writes:

The tax denoted in the text was a specific tax... It was a poll tax, a tax instituted in A.D. 6. A census taken at that time (cf. Lk. 2:2) to determine the resources of the Jews provoked the wrath of the country. Judas of Galilee led a revolt (Acts 5:37), which was suppressed only with some difficulty. Many scholars date the origin of the Zealot party and movement to this incident.

The Jewish Encyclopedia says of the Zealots:

When, in the year 5, Judas of Gamala in Galilee started his organized opposition to Rome, he was joined by one of the leaders of the Pharisees, R. Zadok, a disciple of Shammai and one of the fiery patriots and popular heroes who lived to witness the tragic end of Jerusalem... The taking of the census by Quirinus, the Roman procurator, for the purpose of taxation was regarded as a sign of Roman enslavement; and the Zealots' call for stubborn resistance to the oppressor was responded to enthusiastically.

At his trial before Pontius Pilate (Luke 23:1-4), Jesus was accused of promoting resistance to Caesar's tax.

Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. 2 And they began to accuse him, saying, “We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Render\\_unto\\_Caesar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Render_unto_Caesar)