

PENTECOST 22, OCTOBER 22, 2023

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 22:15-22 The Message , by Eugene Peterson

Paying Taxes

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ That's when the Pharisees plotted a way to trap him into saying something damaging. They sent their disciples, with a few of Herod's followers mixed in, to ask, "Teacher, we know you have integrity, teach the way of God accurately, are indifferent to popular opinion, and don't pander to your students. So tell us honestly: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ Jesus knew they were up to no good. He said, "Why are you playing these games with me? Why are you trying to trap me? Do you have a coin? Let me see it." They handed him a silver piece.

²⁰ "This engraving – who does it look like? And whose name is on it?"

²¹ They said, "Caesar."

"Then give Caesar what is his, and give God what is his."

²² The Pharisees were speechless. They went off shaking their heads.

SERMON "*After Church*" Pastor Mary Jo Laabs

Please pray with me: Sometimes, we are speechless, oh God...amazed at what you are doing all around us. Sometimes we're not sure which side of the coin is "calling." Calm us and settle us, good and gracious God...and let there not be any question about which way we turn in our needs and in our giving thanks. Amen!

Johnny's mother looked out the window and noticed that he was "playing church" with "Minnie," the family cat. He had placed her on a lawn chair and Johnny, pretending to be a Pastor, seemed to be "preaching" to her. Johnny's mother shook her head, smiled and went about her work.

It wasn't long before she heard yelling, meowing and hissing. She ran back to the open window. Now, it appeared as though Johnny was attempting to *baptize* the cat in a tub of water.

She called out, "Johnny, stop that! You should know that "Minnie" is afraid of water!"

Johnny, still wrestling with "Minnie," looked up and said,

"Well, she should have thought about that before she chose to join my church."

On Sunday December 4th, following Worship, Pastor Nick and I will be hosting a "new member" gathering. We will answer questions and chat with you who are considering joining in the membership of First Congregational UCC, Appleton. We promise "pleasant" conversation, even if you are afraid of water!

In these few minutes, I'd like to draw your attention to what it means for each one of us when we join in communal "belonging" and make a commitment to "being the church" together.

Take a deep breath...and let it out.

Why be a church?

1. Can't we worship God in a fishing boat or on the walking trail on Sunday mornings? There fewer demands out on the water...or in the woods. No one will pass a collection plate. No one will ask *pesky* questions like, "How will we address the homeless situation in our community?" No one will tell a Sunday morning jogger or someone in a boat to "Repent and believe in the Gospel."

Why be a church?

2. Can't we gather with our friends at the Performing Arts Center and be entertained by music of the masters performed by the Fox Valley Symphony? Won't we be assured of a good, comfortable seat and valet parking? Isn't *this* music just as good for the soul as the music we listen to and sing during a church service?

Why be a church?

3. Isn't it a good thing to give a donation to the Red Cross once a year and drop off food at a food pantry when there is a sale on macaroni and cheese? Can't we be generous when we feel like it, not only when the Stewardship Committee reminds us, "It's that time again to make a pledge for 2024!"

Why be a church?

4. Can't we satisfy our spiritual craving by reading a popular "self-help" book, or by listening to a pod cast or "music for mediation" on Youtube?

That would be one side of the coin that Jesus is talking about. The secular side that tugs at us...the side that prods us to pay taxes because it is the law. It is the also side that same side that challenges us to demand justice when the actions of the government and the teachings of Jesus come into conflict.

It took me several times of re-reading this passage of scripture in different versions, until it occurred to me, that these are words of commission coming from the mouth of Jesus:

NRSV: "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." ²² When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

CEB: Then he said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what *belongs* to God." ²² When they heard this they were astonished, and they departed.

Good News Bible: So, Jesus said to them, "Well, then, pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor and pay to God what *belongs* to God."

²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

We are not involved in a coin-toss organization. Jesus turns our attention has invited us to be committed to a "belonging." As the church, we belong to a faith community. We carry one another's concerns and do a lot of laughing and hugging when there is joy to share! In the United Church of Christ, we do not test one another and we do not place expectations on one another that require us to believe or conform to certain beliefs.

1. Did the architecture of this building entice you to come inside? Or was it a friend or family member who invited you? Maybe you applied for a job here or are new in town and are "church shopping"? Or did you just feel compelled to walk through these doors, and when you did, it became like home to you... you felt a call to belonging.

2. This “belonging” has been much more to us than a Sunday morning appointment with God. We have found *real people* here who remembered our name without looking at a name tag. We feel comfortable with the “Come as you are” welcome here. We have all quickly come to know that this multi-generational community with a warm heart for children and youth, is *alive* with the giggles and smiles of young people and also engages adults in Bible studies, in educational opportunities and in outreach Ministries.
3. There is always something happening here that invites us to do good or as John Lewis suggests,
that invites us to “Get in good trouble... necessary trouble...Jul 17, 2021
4. In belonging to the church, you will, if you have not already...made life-long friends. Where would you have had the opportunity to worship, pray praise, join in fellowship...laugh, cry, with this group of people if you hadn’t come through these doors??? It is in belonging that we find that we truly **need** each other’s talents, we value each other’s time and we are blessed by doing our best to love and care for one another, the community and the world around us.
5. Belonging to the church is becoming part of a community of faith where we are always welcomed in (no matter who we are or where we are on our life’s journey); where we are revived by God’s “still-speaking” voice and where we are uplifted in the very depths of our souls by prayer and praise, as well as by moments of silence ...

Why be the church??? Well, it is no secret that, even though we feel that we may have been “pushed, pulled or dragged” here... it is because God has called us. Thanks be to God!

There is still another thought that has come to me in today’s scripture passage: As the Pharisees were trying to “trap Jesus,” to “test him” and prove that Jesus was a fraud, it makes me wonder if we have been guilty of doing the exact thing! Looking back, have you ever tried to make a deal with Jesus? Have you played the, “If I don’t *get my way* game” with Jesus? Have these words come out of your mouth: “If this or that doesn’t happen here, then, I quit.” “If so and so doesn’t do something differently, I am canceling my church membership.”

“Dear Jesus, if you will cure **my** illness, I will increase my giving to the general fund next year.”
“All I want is a church that will care about me and bury me when the time comes.”

What have you said? Forgive us, good and merciful God!

MAY God bless us as we realize that being the church isn’t about what we can “get out of it” but, **is about giving to God what already belongs to God**...and in the words of John Wesley: “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.”

Did you know that the United Church of Christ Denomination was founded in 1957 by the uniting of Evangelical, Reformed, Congregational, Christian and African American denominations...and that our ancestors in faith:

- Joined in the first act of civil disobedience in US History...the Boston Tea party.
- Ordained the first African American, Lemuel Haynes, 1776
- Ordained the first woman, Antoinette Brown.
- Ordained the first openly gay minister, Rev. William R. Johnson, 1972

More recently, the national website of the UCC, posts this **Mission statement:** *United in Spirit and inspired by God's grace, we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.*

The innovations of our denomination have continued during the last 66 years and the courageous vision for the future includes: Christ-driven connection, Spirit-led leadership, God centered action. We are and always will be a church of extravagant welcome...a church of truth-telling against systems of oppression...a church that encourages authentic connection and compassion between individuals, our local communities and the world.

(Check out ucc.org "Who We Are" for details. Subscribe to the WI Conference newsletters.)

We do not even have to look out the window to witness how we are being the church... Being the church begins with amazement... Always did and we are making sure that it continues. (pause)

Oh, I haven't forgotten to tell you why I entitled this message, "After Church." It is because I want to suggest that we *CORRECT* our language here.

Every time you find yourself saying, "After church today, we are taking a ride up North." Or, "After church, I'm staying for the book study." Or, "After church today, there is coffee hour." Or, "After church, there is trunk or treat!..."

STOP and think, and know that it really is ALWAYS CHURCH, whoever we are, whatever we are doing. whatever day it is. Church is a way of living and loving. I am the church. You are the church. We are the church together.

>>>There really is no such thing as, "After Church." Need another deep breath? Take it!

Benediction:

Next week, Derek Elkins and pastor Dianne Droster will lead worship.

The title of Derek's message will be: "This is a Test"

**Go now, knowing that God will grant us strength and grace sufficient to this day, that we might move through its *unfolding* as we do our best to be the church, now and AFTER NOW.
Amen.**