

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer

November 11, 2007

Haggai 2: 1-9; Luke 20: 20-26

Our Gifts

At first it might seem that our Old Testament and Gospel readings we heard this morning send contradictory messages. From the prophet Haggai we hear God telling the people that “the silver is mine, and the gold is mine.” Then in Luke we hear Jesus telling the people, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God the things that are God’s.”

It seems that Jesus is contradicting Haggai, doesn’t it? That Jesus is admitting that not all the silver and gold belong to God, that some of it belongs to Caesar. It seems that Jesus is suggesting that both Caesar and God have a rightful claim on our money and that Caesar is just as worthy a recipient of our giving as God. Is this right? Is this really Jesus’ message?

To get at that answer, I want us first to consider each Scripture lesson separately, and then discover if and how we can put them together.

So we’ll begin with the Gospel. It is an account of Jesus’ fending off those who are determined to entrap him. His opponents want Jesus to betray himself -- to give just cause for their opposition and therefore his punishment. So they ask a political question – is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor or not? Some background information will probably be helpful here. When a country was conquered, the conquering nation

required a tribute from the conquered – as a way of maintaining security. From the time of Julius Caesar, the Palestinian Jews were required to pay an annual tribute of 12/5% of their agricultural products to Rome. In addition to this tribute, which was paid by the whole community, a direct poll-tax was imposed on each individual. The census taken by Quirinius, governor of Syria when Jesus was born, was a method of determining the poll tax. Based on evidence both within the New Testament and on outside sources, we think that this poll tax amounted to a silver denarius.

The problem for Jews and then of course Christians was how God's people were to react to the pagan government of Rome and its enforcement of this tribute and tax. There were groups in Israel who resisted payment and there were groups who acquiesced, though most with resentment. This is the setting for our Gospel story. Whose side was Jesus on? Does he favor open rebellion – or is he saying it is lawful in God's eyes for God's chosen people to pay tribute to a pagan king, a king whose coins were inscribed with these words: "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus?"

Jesus offends neither side – and says nothing that will get him in trouble with the Roman officials. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." On the surface it appears that Jesus places Caesar and God on equal planes, and that what is due Caesar is as important as what is due God. There is the political kingdom and there is God's kingdom. Be loyal to both. Support both. Honor both.

But is this really what Jesus is saying? Another interpretation suggests that Jesus is not endorsing two parallel but separate kingdoms, Caesar's and God's. Instead by placing the phrase, 'and to God the things that are God's' after the phrase about rendering to Caesar, Jesus is indicating his preference for God's claim on our lives over and above any claim Caesar might have. New Testament Scholar Joseph Fitzmyer suggests Jesus is saying something like this: "The coin belongs to Caesar, but you belong to God....The coin, which bears the image of Caesar, we owe to Caesar. We, however, as men who bear the image of God, owe ourselves to God. Fitzmyer continues, "The kingdom which Jesus preaches does not call in question Caesar's rightful kingship, but that is not the all-important aspect of human life. A human being belongs to God, whose image he/she bears; God has not only a right of possession over human beings, but also a claim to a basic recognition of his lordship."

This, I think, is a valid interpretation and one I want us to consider. Who is our Lord? Who has first claim on our loyalty and obedience? To whom do I owe the most? Is it not God -- the Creator and Supreme Ruler of the Universe -- the saver of my soul and the redeemer of my life? Why then am I more deliberate in my rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's than I am in rendering to God the things that are God's? Every year I spend a great many more hours completing my 1040 tax forms than I do filling out my church pledge card. How about you? I know what Caesar demands from me. As I as clear about what God wants from me? The truth is God wants all of me -- and God expects the very best from me -- and if I really love God as much as I say I do, then I will not hold back in my expression of that love. If God is really the Lord of my life, then I will not give other lords more of my loyalty than I give God. For example -- when I am

presented with the choice of how to spend the extra \$50 I received as a gift, do I give it to the church or do I go shopping with it? When I look at my monthly budget, who gets more of my income -- restaurants and entertainment, or God? Do I spend as much on tickets to a ball game and new clothes as I give to the church? Who really is the Lord of my life? To whom do I pay the most homage?

This is where I want us to remember the Old Testament lesson from the prophet Haggai. Let me fill things in a bit with some historical information. Judah's exile in Babylon ended in 538 B.C. when the Persian emperor, Cyrus, conquered the Babylonians. The Jewish captives began returning to their homeland, the first of them arriving in Jerusalem in 536. Haggai first addressed the returned exiles in 520. Although Cyrus had authorized the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, no work on it had yet begun. Haggai urges the people to rebuild the Temple, and they do. Zerubbabel is governor and Joshua is high priest. The foundations were laid. But when the people imagined how the completed building would look, they were discouraged. The reality of the present clashed with the glory of the past. How could this new Temple ever compare with Solomon's? How could they ever re-construct something so beautiful, so splendid? Haggai understands that that discouragement runs deeper than their disappointment with the building. He knows that the Temple, along with the monarchy in the line of David, symbolized for all of them the kingdom of God. Complaints about the building reflect doubts about the presence and power of God.

So Haggai first proclaims God's words of encouragement and reassurance: "Take courage all you people of the land – and work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts,

according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.” The God who delivered them from Egyptian captivity is the same God who has delivered them from Babylonian captivity; his power has not diminished, and his promises are still valid. He is still their God and they are still his people.

Then Haggai prophesies about the future – and describes the coming of God’s kingdom: “In a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The day will come when all the peoples of the earth will recognize and acknowledge through their gifts that Yahweh, the Lord of hosts, is God.”

What to do in the meantime? For Haggai the answer was to build the Temple. Does building the Temple usher in God’s kingdom? No. Only God can do that. But each generation of God’s people is called to respond to God and to participate in God’s design and plan. Haggai’s generation demonstrated its devotion to God by rebuilding the Temple. God will attend to its splendor.

What matters is that God’s will is done. For whenever and wherever God’s will is done, the kingdom comes.

The silver and gold belong to God -- they really do. We may do other good things with God’s silver and gold – God’s dollars and cents – and of course God intends for God’s

people to have the basic necessities of life and to enjoy life's good gifts. But never at the expense of the poor and never without acknowledging God as the rightful owner of all that we have.

So what is the will of God for us in this time and place? Is God still powerfully present in our lives? Today continues our stewardship theme of "Blessed to be a Blessing," and by now some of you have attended a group meeting where you received information about our church and your 2008 pledge card; others of you might have already received that information in the mail. It's provided today again for everyone -- just so you can look at it now. In 2007 our church budget totaled \$254,000. It's not a budget filled with a lot of bells and whistles -- if you look around here enough you can see for yourself that not too much around here is new and shiny. We aren't air-conditioned; we don't have a fancy church bus to pick people up with; we don't have a big screen projector in the sanctuary; except for me as pastor, everyone who works here works part-time and is paid a modest salary without any health or pension benefits. If you look at the program part of our budget, you'll see even more clearly how modestly we live around here. We don't spend money just to spend it. We recycle our paper. We borrow resources from other churches. We hold off church and parsonage repairs that we can live without repairing. We might wonder, therefore, what difference our \$254,000 makes in the grand scheme of things. Does it really matter whether this church meets its budget or not? Does it really matter whether this church has a good music program, or an enjoyable Vacation Bible School next summer? Does it matter that we meet our obligations for global and local missions? Does our \$254,000 make a difference?

Haggai says that it is God who will give the Temple its splendor. All the people have to do is build it. God will do the rest.

Maybe that's how we should look at our church -- if we are faithful, if we do the ministry God has called us to do, if we worship God as the Lord of our lives, if we give to God the things that are God's -- then God will bless us, and in this place we will feel God's holy presence and see God's splendor and experience God's love and God's power. God will do good and marvelous things with the gifts we bring. God will restore broken lives, and heal broken hearts. God's word will be taught and studied and shared and preached, bringing hope and salvation to those who hear it. God's praises will be sung and hearts will be touched. The hungry will be fed, and the naked clothed. Hospitals and colleges and children's homes and retirement homes will be supported and maintained. Christian books and journals and newspapers will be published and distributed. Refugees will be sheltered; conflicts will be mediated; the sick will be healed; the lost will be found; the sorrowful will be comforted. And so on. God will use our \$254,000 to his honor and glory. If we give God what belongs to God, and if we are faithful in doing God's will, God's kingdom is at hand.

Along with our prayers and our presence and our service, we promise to uphold the church with our gifts. Gifts can include things like our gifts of music, hospitality, cooking, conversation, teaching, artistry, carpentry, peacemaking, comfort, compassion, humor -- and so on. But gifts also means our silver and gold -- our dollars and cents -- our money. In addition to the handout about Redeemer's financial needs, you have received a percentage giving chart. I invite you to take a look at this before you make

your financial commitment to Redeemer for 2008. What does being faithful to what God has given you look like for you? Of all that you have, what will you render to the Lord?

“My Spirit abides among you; do not fear, says the Lord of hosts.

“Give to God the things that are God’s,” says the Lord Jesus Christ.

May we take courage as a church and do the work of God that is set before us. And may we remember always who our Lord is, and give unto him all that belongs to him. Then may God bless the offering of our gifts, and our lives in the offering -- and then may that offering be used to be a blessing to others. Amen.