

Whose kingdom? Whose coin?

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Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: Matthew 22:15-22

Can you remember the last time the world mourned the passing of a chief executive officer as it did last week with Apple's Steve Jobs?

In the last few days, Jobs has been hailed as the most admired CEO of the last century and one of the greatest business visionaries ever. There's no denying that his work did touch millions of lives - right down to those who live in the Cleghorn household. In four years, we've gone from one Apple product to six and our old Windows-based desktop just gathers dust in the closet. (Sorry about that, Bill Gates.)

As Jobs would have it – and perhaps this is a most fitting tribute – the world has been busy emailing, Tweeting and Facebooking about Jobs' life and impact. If there are I pads in heaven, I'm sure Jobs is keeping up with all the cyber-chatter. In fact, someone said they saw a cartoon of Jobs standing at Heaven's gate as St. Peter shuffled through a stack of papers to try to find Jobs' name. Jobs said to St. Peter, "You know, I have an app for that."

In the middle of all of that, a Caldwell friend forwarded an altogether different cartoon via Facebook. Some others of you saw it. It was poignant reminder of whose we are, who we are called to be and how that calling should transcend all earthly authority and influence, whether that authority and influence rests in the halls of government or even the Apple store at the mall.

The cartoon pictured Jesus sitting on a bench in a lovely garden with one of his disciples. Jesus speaks to the disciple, saying: "No, I'm not talking about Twitter. I literally want you to follow me."

Two thousand years ago, Jesus said the same thing to a group of Pharisees and loyal Roman citizens. Well, it was virtually the same thing. The only difference was that instead of referring to Twitter or using an Iphone, Jesus held up a roman coin with the image of the Roman Emperor Caesar on it. In our day, an Iphone might be the coin of the realm – an object of value and prevalence in society. But back then the coin of the realm was exactly that – a coin that bore the image of the one to whom everyone was supposed to be loyal.

Jesus held up the coin and said:

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

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As with other passages from Matthews that we’ve considered here on Sunday mornings, this exchange between Jesus and the religious and government authorities of the day comes amid a sweeping drama. It is a story of pursuit. Matthew doesn’t paint a kind picture of the Pharisees. Jesus made them uneasy and he threatened their power.

Throughout Matthew, the Pharisees are paired with Roman government authorities in their shared pursuit of Jesus. This adds drama to the pursuit and sets Jesus’ followers far apart from the ruling institutions of the day. Time and again in Matthew, the authorities try to corner Jesus, often with clever rhetorical questions. But, time and again, Jesus only leaves his pursuers confounded and frustrated.

Then, as now, government taxation was a controversial subject. The Romans were the occupying power. They sought a peaceful rule over the region - as long as the people stayed in line and didn’t cause trouble. Protest demonstrations like those we’re witnessing this weekend in Charlotte and in 70 other cities in America would not have been tolerated. But if the people just paid tribute to the appointed Roman ruler, Herod Antipas, and paid their taxes to his boss in Rome, Caesar, everyone would get along just fine.

So, in that context, the question that the Roman government officials and the Temple officials come up with is particularly devilish. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?”

If Jesus condoned paying taxes, he would win the approval of the Roman government but risk undercutting the religious authorities. If Jesus opposed paying taxes, he would give the Romans the evidence they sought to prove that he was a danger to the Roman Empire. One way or the other, these set of odd allies, the religious and Roman authorities, figured they would get Jesus. But they didn’t.

We should be careful about how we interpret Jesus’ words about giving unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s. Jesus did not intend this to be heard as a convenient truce or a comfortable compromise. To the contrary, Jesus’ statement

highlighted the drastic difference between two kinds of kingdoms – the human kingdoms we build on earth and the kingdom of heaven, which Jesus himself had ushered in.

Jesus' recognized that whatever bears the image of earthly powers will get its share. Caesar got his share – and then some – of the coins he had minted in his honor. Our own government puts pictures of its buildings on our money – and our government gets its share. It's even true with consumer products. Apple computers, for example, bear the Apple image, and they get their share of our time and our money.

Then surely the same must be true of that which bears the image of God. The church may not be perfect. Even on its best days, the church at large falls short of the image of God. But on its best days and even on its worst, it is the only institution in the world that is charged with building up the kingdom of heaven on earth. In that role, it will always stand apart from every other institution.

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And that brings us to an important question in the life of faith: Can the kingdom of heaven really be achieved here on earth? Or is it only to be seen in full in the realm of the divine, in heaven? Can we see it and even achieve it here on this flawed, temporary plane? Or is it something that we can only look forward to seeing on the day we see our creator face to face? Do the two kingdoms stand apart? Or can they – and do they – intersect?

The trouble with believing that the kingdom of heaven can only be seen in heaven is that it gets us off the hook in the here and now. Such a belief means we don't have to commit to working to build the kingdom here because, after all, it really can't be achieved by us regular humans.

Some read that meaning into Jesus' instruction to "Pay unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God's what is God's." But I can't believe that's what Christ had in mind. Worse, as in the cartoon of Jesus and the disciple, believing that the kingdom of heaven can only exist in heaven means we don't really have to follow Jesus with our very lives because, well, as everyone knows, that's really inconvenient.

But, church, the life of faith isn't meant to be convenient. It asks for more. It demands more. It requires more. It doesn't require perfection. It doesn't require our personal bankruptcy. But I believe that it does require our participation. It calls us - and it requires us - to seek to be disciples, a word that means "learner," someone who is making the effort, who is giving it their best effort, someone who is not holding back.

So in many ways, to be a disciple is to participate. Jesus' disciples were often portrayed as bumbling fools. But the one thing they did do right – and what made them disciples – is that they put down their nets and followed Jesus. They declared their loyalty to a kingdom even before they saw the first glimpse of it. They often misunderstood Jesus. They got it wrong more than a few times. But they participated. They followed Christ as teacher and as Lord.

As this church enters the second week of its brief discipleship campaign, we are striving for one mark of discipleship. That is participation – participation by everyone who is part of the Caldwell community. That participation takes shape with two promises. First, that you promise to support the work of this church with some of your money, because money is needed for ministry. Second, that you promise to empower the ministries of this church with some of your time, that you promise to be the hands and feet of Christ to help build the kingdom of heaven on earth. Everyone one of us has some money and some time to give. I firmly believe that.

The notion of the kingdom of heaven breaking through in the here and now should be both daunting and inspiring for all of us. Daunting to think that God might use even us – even me and even you – to pick up where Jesus left off in building the kingdom of heaven on earth, using the blueprints Jesus left us to build a society that is fair and just, compassionate and loving. At the same time, the notion of building the kingdom of heaven on earth is inspiring. How can we not be inspired by such an honored call and opportunity? How can anything else in life – any other way we might spend our time or our money – even compare?

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For the last 30 years or so, this church's sexton, Fred Hamilton, has cared for these old buildings and grounds. Fred has seen preachers come and go. He has also seen a congregation go, at least almost completely, and another one come. He recently told me he'd like to retire by the end of the year.

He says he's never seen the church this busy and the church grounds this full. Having already retired from Duke Power, he's now ready to really retire. He admits, with an appreciative grin, that the church has just gotten too busy for him to keep up with.

Last week, I arrived back at the church after a meeting in the community. I zipped in to my parking space, hit my brakes and threw the car into park. There sat Fred, on the tailgate of his old Dodge pick-up, taking a break from mowing the grass. With a look of

peace and contentment, he was gazing up at the sky and feeling the warm sun on his face on a lovely early autumn afternoon.

“Beautiful day to be working outside,” I said.

“Boy, you ain’t kiddin’,” Fred replied. “I’m just takin’ a minute to sit. I just wanted to soak it in.”

There is a lot about Fred I am going to miss. Mostly, I am going to miss his down-home, country wisdom. We talked a bit more about our usual topics - his family and his church. As happens frequently, we came around to the subject of how he was raised on a small farm by a single father, who imbued him and his two brothers with a work-ethic, noble values and lasting life lessons. Fred reflected on how he has tried to pass on what he learned from his father to own his sons and their sons after them.

“You know,” Fred said. “I was reading the Bible the other night. I was in Proverbs, verse 26. It says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

He fell silent for a moment and then he looked me in the eye as he has so many times.

“Ain’t that the truth?” he said with a smile of conviction. “Ain’t that the truth!”

Friends, Christ came into the world and gave us a vision, an alternative view of how the world can be. In Christ, we saw how far God was willing to go to introduce the kingdom of heaven into the world, even to the cross.

How can that vision not inspire our hope? And, how can that hope not inspire our discipleship?

Jesus asks two simple but profound questions for our consideration in this season of discipleship: *Whose kingdom? Whose coin?*

In the name of God, the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, Amen.