

Rendering Ourselves to God

(Matthew 22:15-22)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 22, 2017

In the name of one God – creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

With the lessons presented in today's lectionary, I could have gone in any of several directions. In considering the Gospel reading, for instance, there were several options. I could have tried to address the challenges inherent in looking at church versus state, of trying to find the balance between what God calls us to do and what we are called to do by man.

Since this is stewardship season, I could have opted to go in the direction of making decisions on service – of deciding how to recognize what we should do with our time, talent and treasure and to give from that abundance to the church.

There were many possibilities, and for me that is why crafting sermons is such a joyful task, one that I deeply love. There is an overwhelming abundance of material, and while the Scriptures never change they are alive and constantly open to new interpretation and limitless opportunities for exploration.

But in all honesty, preaching can also be challenging. It can sometimes feel daunting to find what among the material speaks to me and, through the Scriptures and what I find, how God in turn speaks to each of you at any given time. And truthfully, the last few days have been especially challenging as I sat in front of my computer, staring at a blank document and finding that what I was reading in the lectionary wasn't translating into anything on the paper.

In light of the loss of our beloved relative, friend and brother in Christ, Tommy, none of the Scriptures seemed to fit. Perhaps at any other time they might have, but this wasn't any other time. And I struggled.

But then I experienced another joy, one even beyond the joy I feel in writing a sermon. It was the joy of the moment when I stopped talking – or debating God – about what I *think* I should say and instead listen for what God *tells* me I should say. There's a wonderful method of reading Scriptures called *lectio divina*; it's a Benedictine practice of reading God's word and seeing what words pop – of what words come alive. And in one of these moments, God's word popped: it was the admonition in today's Gospel to render to God that which is God's.

And in that moment, I realized God wasn't asking me to ponder words, but rather to ponder actions – to explore what I've witnessed during these difficult days.

First, it is the way that you have rendered your prayers. You have been unceasing in offering them and incredibly faithful in lifting your voices, silently and aloud, to God – of sharing your concerns and your burdens and opening space for God to act. Prayer is powerful, communal prayer even more so. You only need to consider the 80 people who sat in this sacred space on Friday evening two weeks ago to offer prayers for our brother Tommy, and for Wally, and for the entire family. Consider the lay-led healing services that have been initiated, and the need they are fulfilling.

Rendering your prayers to God is one of the most wonderful things you can do. And God loves you.

And second, you have rendered yourselves. Time and again, in these past weeks and in countless weeks and months before, you have asked, “What can I do to help? Where can I jump in and offer my hands and my heart? Who needs my presence and my love?” It’s something I see in the choir stalls and on the organ bench, in the sacristy and at the front door, at the food pantry and the summer lunch program, at WATTS and the Soul-FULL meals.

Rendering your service to God is one of the most wonderful things you can do. And God loves you.

For the past five months, I have been privileged to watch what and how you live the words of Jesus and render to God that which is God’s: the gifts God has given you; your willingness use those gifts to glorify God through your service to one another and the community; the time you give to one another; and most definitely the prayers you offer for one another.

Paul’s words nearly 2,000 years ago in Thessalonians are just as relevant today, and they are lived out in you. In you, God sees your work of faith, your labor of love and your steadfastness of hope. And God loves you.

The Word of the Lord does sound forth from you. It sounds forth from the Gospels, certainly, and sounds forth from the pulpit as I share what God leads me to say. But it definitely sounds forth very much in the way you live, the way you love, and the way you serve. And it is the peace of the Lord that you demonstrate. One of the things I love most about being up here during the peace each Sunday is watching the warmth with which you greet one another. To you, peace isn’t just a catchword you’re saying. It’s a gift that you are giving freely and completely to one another.

Each one of you has been called by God, by name. Since before the beginning of time, God was calling you. As we read in Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart.” Each of you is known; each of you has been set apart; each of you has been given a gift to render to God.

And no matter what difficulties or sorrow we may experience, God will be there as we seek to give of ourselves, offering our gifts and our prayers. No matter what obstacles we encounter on our journeys, God will clear the path.

God gives so that we might give in return. God shows the way so that we might move forward. And God blesses us and loves us, and in return we can – we should – joyfully and with full hearts render to God that which is God’s.

Amen.