

Twenty-third Sunday After Pentecost
Matthew 22:15-22
Preacher: Vicar, Jim Goodyear

St. Peter's Lafayette Hill, PA
October 19, 2008

Leftovers

No doubt, your life, like mine, is filled with many opportunities; opportunities that force us to make decisions as to what to accomplish next. There are choices to make. Most times, something gets pushed aside for another time. It might feel like your loyalty to one organization or another person is challenged. The fall season seems to always be a time filled with more than we can handle. Everything seems to gain a new momentum after the summer vacation season. There are school activities, church activities, family responsibilities and the list goes on. The decisions we make about our activities influences not just our own lives, but the lives of those around us too.

Growing up in a family of four boys, my mother was always cooking a big meal. The cupboards were always filled at least on the day we went to the grocery store, but by the next morning they seemed empty. "Mom, what's to eat. I'm hungry!" We never starved, we always had plenty. After most meals there were leftovers. A quick meal or snack when we came home from school or late from delivering newspapers, missing dinner time together as family. We could choose which leftover we wanted. Saturday noontime was the day the refrigerator got cleaned out. Lunch was a smorgasbord of foods; leftovers from the week. Even with four hungry boys in the house, there were the occasional times when a leftover got pushed to the back. By the time it was discovered, it had started to mold, smell and even change color. Its usefulness as nourishment had run out.

Making choices is difficult. You might be challenged to look deeper into yourself before making an important decision. You weigh the options hoping for the best. In those difficult decisions it feels like one option is pushed to the side in favor of another. Yet the option not selected is still present. We like to think the choices we make are our own. Not something that someone else pushes onto us. Jesus was being forced, or so the Pharisees and Herodians thought, to make a choice. Each party wanted Jesus to side with them. They wanted to find out where Jesus' loyalties lied. They wanted to trap Jesus into making a choice. It was a test to find Jesus' loyalty. Would he be loyal to God or the emperor? Jesus noticed that he was being tested. He saw through their screen of deception, calling them hypocrites.

Have you ever been tested like Jesus? Have you ever felt forced to make a decision that would potentially leave another person(s) on the outside, feeling like a leftover waiting to be recognized? Maybe you have felt like a leftover; pushed to the back of the bottom shelf, out of sight? No matter what relationships we have with family members, work associates, social friends, community organizations, we are challenged by others for our attention. Every day we 'juggle' to try to handle all that comes our way. Our lives are filled with so much to do; we have to decide which to do now, and which to

do at a later time. Like ‘robbing Peter to pay Paul’ you might find yourself in conflict to make a good decision you take from one to give to another. This text challenges us to make decisions about our loyalties, some of them big, some small. We find that divided loyalties pull us tirelessly in one direction, then another.

The response Jesus gives is not what was expected; “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.” Imagine the Pharisees and Herodians when they heard this. You can see them walking away with their tails between their legs. Neither heard what they wanted to hear. They were to give to the emperor what was his because his image and name was on the coin. And they were to give to God what is God’s. The question then becomes, what is God’s? The reality is that everything we have belongs to God. Therefore, all is to be given to the true king, God himself. God is entitled to his property that bears his image – every human being. Each of us is created in God’s image. We bear the divine image just as much as the Roman coin displayed the emperor’s image.

It is easy to see God in the things we like and appreciate most; the things in life that give us satisfaction. Face it, to see God in the things that challenge us, is more difficult. This gospel challenges us to look deeper, to discover all that God gives and how we give of ourselves to each other. Maybe you have read the recent bestseller *The Shack*. In this story Mack experiences a very traumatic life situation. He has questions about how to handle life. One day he receives a note in his mailbox that reads, “meet me at the Shack, Papa”. After a time, Mack decides to make the trek to this place. A place he is afraid to confront. When he arrives, he meets God in the most unlikely of places and in the most amazing context. Mack discovers God in ways much like you and I experience every day.

There is an old story that illustrates how easy it is to deny that all we have comes from God. A prosperous farmer was miserly in what he gave to his church. So his minister went to visit him in hopes of getting him to increase his giving. The minister pointed out to him that the Lord had given him a fertile piece of land and had blessed him with sunshine and rain so that his crops would grow. The preacher added, “You know, this farm and everything you have is really on loan to you from God. You should be more grateful.” The farmer replied, “I don’t mean to complain, Reverend, but you should have seen what a mess this place was when God was running it by himself!”

The preacher was right that everything we possess comes from God, but we tend to believe that our prosperity has more to do with our work ethic and education than a gift from God. It is easy to forget that we are God’s people in a world faced with the challenges of life. Not all people are blessed in the same way. There are people who struggle to find food each day, shelter from the elements of weather, to find meaningful employment, to find who they are in this world.... People not like us are God’s children too. They are not the leftovers of the world, pushed to the back of the refrigerator out of sight to rot and eventually be tossed away because they have been forgotten.

Like the farmer, God gives us the land to plow, plant, nurture and harvest in due time. God gives us the skills and talents to share with others so that together we grow in love and understanding with each other. Yes, it will take time. It is not an overnight fix. It requires that we seek ways together to give life to each other, to discover how each of us is gifted, to share in the body of Christ with each other. We give ourselves to God; not once, but repeatedly. Giving ourselves to God is to be a characteristic of our lives, something that defines and shapes who we are. We are charged with the creative and challenging task of transforming lives into a unified life directed by God and God alone. We will make mistakes along the way. But we must recognize the task for what it is. The wonder of it all is that putting God first; the other appropriate demands of life made of us can fall into their proper places.

Loving God first and foremost gives us the wisdom and orientation to love others in their uniqueness in ways that are right for them and for us. Once we give ourselves absolutely to God, then remarkably we are free to give to others in ways that are gracious and life-giving. The leftovers in and around us are used in ways to glorify God. Moving to include leftovers has to do with giving; giving ourselves totally to God, giving in appropriate ways to others. By giving ourselves to God and to others in the best ways possible, a transformation occurs. We no longer picture ourselves as givers. We are receivers, recipients of divine generosity. This is the truth of our lives and we recognize it.

So we can give to God our entire selves. We can give to others what belongs to them. Thus we come to recognize our relationships with others for what they are, a single, unbroken love, the electricity of God, bringing power and light to the world. We are not the source of that current, but is our ours to enjoy and transmit.