

**29th Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
*(October 22, 2023)*

If you've ever seen the inside of a cockpit of an airliner you know that they look incredibly complicated. Everywhere one looks there are countless switches and lights and levers and knobs and buzzers and displays of all kinds. I don't know how pilots keep it all straight. And, amazingly, each of these items is important in its own way, each having its own purpose. And the people who design these cockpits aren't deliberately trying to make it complicated. If they could simplify it, they would, but enormous machines hurtling through the sky are not simple. It's quite the opposite. Millions of parts are required to build an airliner, parts that all have to work together.

Not everything in an airliner's cockpit is as important as everything else, as you can imagine. Some parts or systems, if they fail completely, simply cause some sort of relatively minor inconvenience for the pilots or crew or passengers. But certain other parts or systems, if they fail completely, result in the plane being unable to stay in the sky. And knowing the difference between the two makes all the difference in the world, in fact, it might actually mean the difference between life and death.

Sadly, there have been horrendous plane crashes that have occurred precisely because of too much attention being paid to things that, in hindsight, weren't that important. One that comes to mind happened decades ago when an L-1011 loaded with passengers crashed into the Everglades at night with great loss of life. It turned out that the crew had all become fixated on a landing-gear light that seemed to have malfunctioned, causing them not to notice that the auto-pilot had become disengaged and that they had slowly started to descend. Disaster followed a short time later. A perfectly good airplane had been accidentally "landed" in the Everglades simply because the crew was distracted from seeing a bigger picture, distracted from seeing what ultimately was most important and keeping the plane in the sky.

**“Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”**

The way I started this homily might seem somewhat strange given the Gospel passage we just heard. And yet, I think that a similar thing is on display in the story from Matthew. Let me explain. The verse I just quoted a few seconds ago is one of the most well-known in the Scripture. A lot has been written about it, much dealing with the first half of that statement and what it might mean to “. . . repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.” But that implies that Jesus’ principal purpose was to instruct them on the lawfulness (or lack thereof) of obeying their Roman occupiers. And I don’t think that’s it at all.

Rather, it seems to me, that this is one more instance of Jesus taking a question from others (in this case, a question trying to entrap him) and using that question to craft an answer illuminating some aspect of faith, answering their question in such a way as to reveal a deeper truth. In this case, he takes a question asking what is owed to Caesar and responds with an answer about what is owed to God. That’s not what they asked him, but Jesus knew that it was the only question that really mattered.

In other words, they were worried about one thing, and Jesus wanted them to be concerned about something else entirely, he wanted them to reflect on a question he knew was much more important than the one they were asking. I guess you could say that they were focused on something less important, and Jesus wanted them to see a much bigger picture.

And it’s not that small things in the spiritual life don’t matter. They do, but only to the extent that they serve a greater purpose, only to the extent that they keep us on the right path, only to the extent that they keep us focused on the right things, only to the extent that they help us lead the God-centered, love-infused lives God so desperately wants for each of us. In a very real sense, God doesn’t want us to be fretting about the small stuff if it distracts us from what is most important, doesn’t want us staring

at a malfunctioning light if it causes us to fail to notice that we've begun to descend.

**“Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”**

Jesus probably said this to the Pharisees not because he was angry that they were trying to entrap him (although he does call them hypocrites), but because he was disappointed that they were becoming too fixated on every little aspect of the law, fixated on “religious practice” rather than on “faithful living”. In fairness to them, they might not even have known there was a difference. To them, agonizing over every little decision of daily life was the best way to be faithful. Jesus, most likely peering into their hearts and minds, sensed that they were losing focus, losing perspective, losing the ability to know what ultimately mattered.

And he probably worries about that in us too.

Are we asking the right questions in faith? Do we see a bigger picture, or do we, like the Pharisees, confuse our religious practices with a truly God-centered life? Do we get overly focused on small moral decisions while failing to consider our over-arching call (and responsibility) to be loving, generous, merciful, compassionate, and forgiving? Simply, do we give to God what is God's (that is, our whole selves), or do we give him something less? Is he in our sights at all times, in our minds in every moment, in our hearts in good times and in bad, or do the things of this world have most of our attention? I believe our lives may depend on how we answer.

### **A Short Story**

A group of alumni, highly established in their careers, got together to visit their old university professor. Conversation soon turned into complaints about stress in work and life. Offering his guests coffee, the professor went to the kitchen and returned with a large pot of coffee and an assortment of cups – porcelain, plastic, glass, crystal, some plain looking, some expensive, some exquisite – telling them to help themselves to the

coffee. When all the students had a cup of coffee in hand, the professor said: "If you noticed, all the nice looking expensive cups were taken up, leaving behind the plain and cheap ones. While it is normal for you to want only the best for yourselves, that is the source of your problems and stress. Be assured that the cup itself adds no quality to the coffee. In most cases it is just more expensive and in some cases even hides what we drink. What all of you really wanted was coffee, not the cup, but you consciously went for the best cups. The cups are just tools to hold and contain Life, and the type of cup we have does not define, nor change the quality of Life we live." Live simply. Love generously. Care deeply. Speak kindly and bloom where you are planted! And leave the rest to God.