

Commitment

(Text: Matthew 22: 15-22)

Back in elementary school, we learned about pie graphs. Do you remember them? Sure you do! A circle represents the whole. Slices of the circle, whether large or small, represent portions of the whole. These slices are often shown in vivid colors. A pie graph can indicate how a budget is divided. It can indicate the breakdown of a population according to age or race or sex. A pie graph can convey many kinds of information in a way that is simple to understand.

You and I may experience life as we live it now in terms of a pie graph. The single self we are is served up in several slices. One slice may be for work, another for school, another for family. There may be slices for church and recreation and community service. Still other slices represent meals and sleep. Together such slices as these make up the pie which is our life here and now.

A pie graph of our life indicates what many of us realize in our bones: that there is only so much of us to go around. If we give more attention to one area, then we must give less to another. If we work more, we may have to sleep less. Increased attention to school may require decreased attention to family. Each of us lives out a different pie graph, but in this respect all of us are the same: we have our limits. We have only so much time, so much energy, so much loyalty.

Nor does it help matters when each part of our life happens in a different place where we interact with a different set of people, each part makes its demands, and it is up to us to reconcile them. Work and home and recreation become mutually exclusive compartments, and all that links together these different experiences is us. It can be hard to recognize these different pieces as belonging to a single pie, a single life.

Another difficulty arises when one part of our life turns into a Caesar that rules over us. This part of life may start out well enough, but eventually turns into a tyrant who taxes us beyond all limit. Family or work or sports begin to consume us. It may even happen that two or three parts try to lord it

over us at the same time, each one pulling us in a different direction! Then life becomes a battle, as opposing forces yank us this way and that, and we end up a casualty. Have you had this experience?

The land where Jesus lives is ruled by a Caesar. It is an occupied land. The people feel the weight of foreign domination. They are taxed beyond endurance. In such a place, it is important to determine a person's attitude toward Caesar. It can prove dangerous to give Caesar anything less than the slice of pie that he wants. Yet to accept his claim to the lion's share can be dangerous as well.

Thus, in their campaign to trap Jesus, his opponents ask him a loaded question. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar to not?" If he says yes, then he loses the support of the masses, who long for freedom. If he says no, then he reveals himself as a subversive and may forfeit his life.

"Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God." With this reply, Jesus raises the debate to a higher level. What is at stake is more than tax payments, more than even the rule of Rome. The question is whether God claims a slice of the pie. The question is whether our allegiance to God is a form of allegiance like any other.

Jesus insists that the claim God makes is unique. What belongs to God is not some slice of the pie, but the whole pie, the complete person. Nothing less will do. Our Creator has a claim on us. The pie belongs to the one who baked it.

Recognize the irony in today's Gospel. After his opponents pose their question, Jesus asks to see one of the coins used for tax payments. They show him a Roman coin that bears the image of the emperor. Jesus asks who is represented on this silver coin. They tell him it is Caesar. And so Jesus resolves their dilemma. They should give Caesar this piece of metal, for it bears his image. On the same basis, they should give God what bears the divine image, namely themselves, for like everyone else, they are made in the image of God. Give your money to Caesar if you must, Jesus says, but give yourselves to God.

God does not want a slice of who we are, whether that slice is thick or thin. God wants our whole selves. God is not part of the competition that pulls us this way and that, but is the one who makes us whole. Our relationship with God is not a matter of the logic of fractions by which we give away portions of who we are. Our relationship with God depends on the logic of love, which demands that we surrender ourselves that we may truly live.

Outside this logic of love, God remains hidden from us, and we remain separated from the self we truly are. But as we give to God what belongs to God, as we honor the divine claim on the whole of our lives, then something remarkable begins to happen. We become adept at giving Caesar what truly belongs to Caesar, no more and no less. We become capable of honoring just claims and rejecting those that are not. Our unqualified love for God finds its reflection in our appropriate relations with others.

Problems do not disappear, but we see them for what they are, and we no longer fear them. The diverse pieces of our pie fit together more truly than they did before. What holds them together is not something we supply. It is the skill of the baker, the one to whom the pie belongs

Give Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but give God what belongs to God. Honor to the appropriate degree every just claim on your life, but give God the entirety of your life. Give to God, who gave it all to you.