

XXIII SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY 2017

SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH

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ST. MATTHEW 22.15



Welcome to a crash course in Numismatics 101...the study and collection of coins and currency.

Most of us know the phrase “In God We Trust” appears on our coins and currency. That hasn’t always been the case.

The phrase appears to have originated in the *Star-Spangled Banner*, written by Francis Scott Key, in the War of 1812...“And this be our motto: ‘In God is our Trust.’”

“In God We Trust” has been the official motto of the United States since 1956. The motto first appeared on the US Two-cent piece in 1864 and on the US \$1 Silver Certificate in 1957.

In 1907 President Theodore Roosevelt had the phrase removed from newly minted \$20 gold pieces. He believed having God’s name on coins was sacrilegious. The public disagreed and the phrase quickly reappeared. \$20 gold pieces without the motto are now valuable collectors items.

What has any of this to do with today’s Gospel? Quite a bit actually, when it comes to images on coins and attitudes toward money, paying taxes and trusting God.

The Pharisees and Herodians in the Gospel are up to their old tricks. Always looking for ways to trap Jesus...they first give him a line about what a smart guy he is...then ask him if it is OK under God’s law to pay taxes to the pagan Roman government.

Instead of answering their question directly...he asks them to show him the coin used for paying taxes...the Roman Denarius...and asks them whose face and name appear on the coin.

The Denarius was engraved with Caesar’s image and the words...“the king is god”. This was a problem for the Pharisees and Herodians and for most Jews...since only Yahweh was God...Caesar’s claim to being god was blasphemous.

The Pharisees and Herodians were hoping Jesus would give them a simple “yes” or “no” answer about paying taxes. If he said yes...they had him for blasphemy. If he said no...they could get the Romans to do their dirty work for them and have him arrested for promoting tax evasion. Jesus does give them an answer...they just don’t know what to do with it.

Most of us complain bitterly about having to pay taxes...it is unlikely the IRS or the Franchise Tax Board would win awards for being nice guys. But everything we have belongs to God in the first place...including our money. He lets us use it...and he expects us to do the right thing with our money...like paying taxes.

The Gospel is more than a story about paying taxes and Jesus getting the upper hand against some men who thought they were really clever. It is about putting God first in our lives. Paying taxes doesn’t offend God...not paying taxes would...God doesn’t want us to break the law.

Let’s return to Numismatics 101 for a moment. The US Mint originally did not want images of presidents on coins...fearing the public would begin to view the presidents as almost god-like. All that changed in 1909...the Lincoln Cent was the first coin to be minted with the image of a president. It is still being minted today...and has always been engraved with the motto “In God We Trust”. Lincoln was a great man...he probably would have been the first to admit he was not God.

The motto “In God We Trust” has been unsuccessfully challenged several times on Constitutional grounds. While it’s nice to see the motto on our coins and currency...it doesn’t make our money any better or more spendable.

But “In God we trust” is a good motto for us to live by. The next time we see the motto on the coins or currency in our pockets...we might want to remember the lesson we learn from today’s Gospel.

Give to God first what is rightfully his...pay our taxes and other obligations...and the rest will take care of itself.

