

Matthew 22:15-22 Pastor Bill Uetricht 10/16/11 18 Pentecost

Boxes really are wonderful things. They really are. You can put your Halloween items in a box, and your Christmas items in another box, or in our case 18 boxes. These boxes enable you to keep things separate, so that when you go to looking for the things you need they can be easily discovered. Boxes are some of the best creations of humanity. They really keep your stuff in some degree of order. And most of us are searching for some degree of order in our lives.

They work well not only for stuff but for life in general. You know, you got *your* (I love it when people use this pronoun in this way) religion box, and you got your politics box, the state box and the church box. You got your school box, your work box, your soccer box, your band box, your church life box. And you bring these boxes out whenever you need to. You know, once a week for an hour you bring out your church box and then put it away when that's done. It's really convenient that way. You check the *box* on your little list and on go to the next thing you are supposed to do, the next *box* on your list to check off. It's a marvelous organizational scheme.

It works well for so many things. You know, you got your **us** box and your **them** box. And frankly, you want to make sure that those boxes don't get their contents mixed up with each other. And you definitely don't want to place them next to each other on the shelves. Wouldn't be prudent!

And then you got your box for evil and your box for good—these always remain separate--your box for the church stuff and your box for the real stuff out there in the real world, your box for the sacred and your box for the secular. And it's quite obvious that the contents of these boxes can never mix. You got your Christian music and your

other kinds of music, your Christian counselors and your other kinds of counselors, your church buildings and your pubs. They just never mix. Life's more orderly that way. The boxes help us keep things straight.

Although we do not often think in this way, unless, of course, we are people who put our money in boxes under our mattresses, boxes are wonderful for organizing our money. You know, for money you got your Caesar box and your God box. For money you got the box that includes the dollars that are yours to control and determine what to do with and the box that contains the dollars that you give away—about 2% of your income if you are good Lutheran, 1.5% if you are a good Catholic, and 3% if you are a good conservative evangelical. The money from those two boxes should never be mixed. There is the *my* box and the *God* box. And all the money that is in the *my* box doesn't have anything to do with God.

Boxes really are handy. They keep things orderly. I think you should buy more of them . . . unless, for some reason, you have a sense of the call of the God of the Bible on your lives. Man, it seems that God is taking on the box theology today. It seems that he wants to bust us out of the boxes. It seems that he in no way is confined to some box created by human hands. God is God, he seems to be saying today. And in many ways, as our theme for today suggests, there are no more questions.

God is God, and God will do what God wants. And what God does isn't always what you expect. God cannot be confined to a box. Case in point: Cyrus the Persian. He's not one of us. He is one of them. He is not part of the sacred; he is the secular. He is not the church; he is the state. Yet God says, according to Isaiah, that Cyrus is the messiah, the anointed one. God has chosen this secular one, one who does even

know God, to be the one who brings liberation to the people of God, especially to the exiles who had been forced to flee to another land. It's God's party, and God will throw it the way he wants to throw it. He will use secular, unexpected means to get the job done.

"God is God, and there is no other." Boxes don't work when it comes to God. And if we aren't quite sure that's true, he makes it very plain when he says: "I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness; I make weal [well-being] and create woe." The reference here is to Persian religion which was known for its creation of boxes in relationship to good and evil. The Persians had gods that represented the good and gods that represented the evil. They were separate gods, separate forces that were in battle with each other. Life was thought to be a big cosmic battle between good and evil.

Now some Christians have picked up this Persian notion and have painted our lives in Christ as a battle between God and Satan, equally powerful forces. Yet for the most part, this is not the Biblical vision. In Isaiah today, *God* is said to be the one who creates light and darkness, well being and woe. Now this raises the potential for some very interesting dialogue, suggesting that maybe indeed there **are** more questions. I mean, how am I to understand the evil in the world; what am I to do with the suffering and evil that are imposed upon me? Am I to attribute them to God? I am not sure but I don't think so. But this I know for sure, Isaiah's vision of God will not allow us to conclude that evil is simply a creation of an equally powerful force in the universe, that evil is not somehow still within the purview, the scope and purposes of God. This is a complex conversation, and so much more needs to be said about the topic, but we would need a lot of time and probably a different setting for the conversation. One thing is for sure,

though. Dealing with life simply on the basis of an evil box and a good box is not sufficient. Life is much more complex. God is much more complex.

I think we find ourselves in the midst of God's complexity in our gospel lesson for today. The story of this lesson starts out with the Pharisees and the Herodians (a Roman group of some sort) giving Jesus insincere flattery. "We know you are sincere," they say. "We know that you show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality." And we all lift our boots up. "Tell us; is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

It sounds as if the Pharisees and the Herodians have come to Jesus as if he were H and R Block and could give them a little tax advice. But they don't want tax advice; they want to trap him. They want to get him into trouble. To side with the no tax group will cause problems for Jesus with the Romans who worry that he is unsettling the empire. To side with the pro tax group will cause problems for him with many of the Jews, for the money that pays the taxes has a picture of the emperor on it and says that he is the son of a divine one. In other words, the emperor is divine. No wonder this money couldn't go into the temple! No wonder you had to exchange it before you went into the temple! Nothing could be more blasphemous than to suggest that the emperor is divine. In no way could such a coin enter a Jewish temple. Jews don't want to touch that filthy lucre.

Now I don't know if you noticed, but it doesn't take the Pharisees very long to show Jesus the Roman coin that would be used for the tax. These Pharisees who are opposed to the tax and opposed to what the tax-paying coins mean must have the filthy lucre in their pocket, and in case you don't know it the conversation is taking place in the temple.

“Whose head is on this coin and whose title is on it?” Jesus asks these *deeply concerned and faithful* Pharisees. “The emperor’s,” they respond. Then he says, “Give, therefore to the emperor’s the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Oh good! Some boxes right? The things that are the emperor’s and the things that are God’s. Church and state. Religion and politics. They are separate realities, right? Separate boxes, right? Politics and religion ought to never mix, right? What I think about the faith shouldn’t at all affect what I think about politics, right? Keep your church life fully separate from the rest of your life, right?

Sometimes this is how Jesus’ words have been interpreted. Church and state, religion and politics separate. But I urge you to look closer at Jesus’ answer. “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s.” Okay, pay the tax. Someone I read the other day wrote, “Civilization is expensive, and taxes pay the tab.” If you want a common life, life that we enjoy together, we got to pay taxes. But Jesus’ response doesn’t end there. “Give to God the things that are God’s.” Let me ask you. From a good Jewish perspective what things aren’t God’s? What things don’t belong to God?

Therein lies the fundamental Christian stewardship question: what things don’t belong to God? The response is obvious—all things belong to God. Jesus is not inviting us into a world of boxes—a church box and a state box, a religion box and a politics box, my box and a God box. It all belongs to God. All of your money—what you use for yourself and what you give away—belongs to God. The secular and the sacred, the religious and the political, the church and the state, us and them—all belong to God. What you do Monday through Saturday is just as important as what you do on Sunday. Your politics need to be

driven by the depths of your faith. How you spend the money that you don't give away is just as important as is the portion you give away. God is at work in what happens in the world outside of the church as he is within the church. The foreigners, the folks outside of our group, even the folks who do not know God—the *them*--can be the means by which God does something remarkable and liberating for us

I know you like boxes. And they may be good for the Halloween and the Christmas stuff. But when it comes to life—life that matters--they need to go. Life is too complex for them. And besides what, or may I say, who matters—God—is never going to fit in any box you and I could create. God gives it all. God wants it all.