

St James United Church

Message for October 18, 2026

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost



“Giving to God What Is God’s” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Isaiah 45:1-7; and Matthew 22:15-22

What a lovely celebration today. We welcomed Ben into this faith community through baptism. and lifted up ways some of us live our baptism through acts of service as we seek to live lovingly in our community and our world. We did this together in this sacred space as disciples of Jesus.

Our prayer stands in contrast to what we heard in our gospel as Jesus was confronted in another sacred space by Pharisees and Herodians, normally divided by politics and theology but joined in their dislike of Jesus’ “disruptive” influence in their community. They tried to trip him up with a fraught question about paying taxes to the emperor. He ended up tripping up the one who gave him a Roman coin, revealing them as more willing to work with the Romans than they let on, and less dedicated to keeping God’s law, each coin a graven image. His response, “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” was a good strategy.

It was also good theology. That theology hinges on Jesus asking, “whose *eikon* is this?” Today’s version of the reading renders *eikon* as head, but it’s really image, likeness. It reminds us of Genesis 1:27 which I quoted two weeks ago: “God created humans in their likeness.” Jesus is right to say “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s” but the advice is limited because as important as Caesar was, everything is imprinted with God’s image. Isaiah reminds us of this, Cyrus, the Persian emperor, God’s anointed even if he wasn’t Judean. We may divide into sects and political groups, tribes and generations, but to God we’re all one. Giving to God is about honouring this unity and always takes precedence. It is shown in the care given to everyone, extended even to those who seem to be working for Caesar, like Cyrus who brutally waged war even as defeating Babylon meant Judeans returned home. Isaiah says he was working for God, but even if he wasn’t, our call still would be to treat him with love him. We love people with whom we disagree, otherwise we further Caesar’s way of dominance, rather than God’s kin-dom, the way of loving neighbours and of nurturing community.

Jesus’ way of nurturing community may have been seen by his challengers as disruptive, but Caesar’s way was the real disruption. His contemporaries fell into that, divided from each other, also adding barriers between them and God. The confrontation in the Temple was part of that, Pharisees and Herodians angry like the chief priests and elders, because Jesus cleansed the Temple the day before. But he did it to remind us that we are fundamentally connected to each

other and God, moneychangers and merchants an unneeded layer of commerce complicating those relationships. His action was again about all people being images of God, bringing them back to the garden in Genesis when God was seen as close to the people as well as them to each other. Jesus came to renew that connection.

As followers of Jesus, we seek to embody that within faith community. That is what baptism does, makes us one in him, no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. We echo here what Jesus formed with his disciples, bringing together a group from disparate backgrounds. There are few places in our world where that happens intentionally, multiple generations, races, political viewpoints, life experiences in intentional relationship. We pray together, talk together, work through conflict together, and develop skills desperately needed in a world that prefers the way of Caesar. The result in the world is division and fear, people isolated and alone, situations amplified by technology. Like moneychangers and merchants, it often adds a layer between us. Technology was supposed to connect us, remember how we were told that. But now each innovation seems to pull us apart. How? Well, we discuss issues like the Alberta referendum online, doing so in silos from each other, forgetting how to debate with love. We text rather than visit someone or talk on the phone because it removes the tension, the awkward pauses, the time needed for conversation. But isn't that the point? Isn't that how we build a relationship? We ask AI where the best fish and chips is when we could ask a neighbour. We may get caught in a conflict about Ches's versus Leo's but we're richer for the exchange. And we may learn that their dad is sick, offer them support, nurture friendship. It takes effort and we risk being vulnerable, but we are better for it. We've lost this art in our day to day, but in faith community we practice it as we chat over coffee, reach out in difficult times, serve each other, resolve differences with love. As we do, we feel more confident nurturing community and in turn building unity in the world.

That is the giving to God that Jesus wanted for us, lived out in faith community. And we heard the result earlier as we spoke about different ways that we serve our community, motivated to do that because we learn in this community the joy that serving others can bring. It's how we live out the kin-dom of God, making his loving way a reality here and living it in the world. May we keep doing it, giving to God what is God's. Amen.