

When you hear the saying, “let go and let God”, what do you think of? Usually I’ve heard, and sometimes used, this phrase when I feel really overwhelmed or stressed out about something, like a difficult moment in a friendship or trying to discern what the next steps might be for a season of life. Usually it’s after lots of different things and approaches have been tried to deal with the situation, and it’s simply a raising up of our hands and giving what we’re worried about to God. When we finally realize that we can’t really do a whole lot more in a situation, not for lack of effort, but it’s just simply our limitation, that then we let go of it, and let God.

Now what exactly does “letting God” mean? Sometimes this can feel unhealthy, or problematic, when folks assume that God is just going to do as they please, the solutions or plans they come up with, and give up any sense of responsibility for the situation. And this is not what letting God means. Letting God means that we are actively calling upon God’s presence and work in the world when we are overwhelmed. Letting God is us turning away from thinking we can do everything ourselves, and yet trusting that God is still at work in us and around us. Letting God is an acknowledgement that God is active in our world, and that leaning on and having faith in God’s movement in our world, among all of creation, is so life-giving and life-saving in any time or place. Letting God means we are actively working on and strengthening our faith relationship with our Creator, God.

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's,” Jesus famously says in our Gospel lesson today. The key point in Jesus’ proclamation here, and for us even now, is that both of these recipients, the emperor and God, require effort from us, we still have to do something in the giving. But the key difference is that the emperor cannot function without what we give them. God still moves and works and loves us regardless of what we have to offer, even when we aren’t great about what we give to God.

It is our calling to live in a way that we give God what is God’s, what belongs to God.

So let's dive into these differences and what it actually means to give God what is God's. In our Gospel text today, we begin with the Pharisees and Herodians banding together and plotting to catch Jesus in a trap. These two groups of people were unlikely partners in plots or plans of any kind, so this is automatically suspicious to Jesus. The Pharisees, as we have learned in past weeks, were religious leaders who absolutely stuck to the letter of God's law, were not shy about pointing these laws out to Jesus and others, and yet still collaborated with the Roman Empire even though they sought the authority of God above all else. The Herodians were people who followed King Herod, the King who ruled over this geographic area and had a good relationship with the emperor. The Herodians often collaborated with the Roman Empire out of economic interest, and were a bit more lax about religious law. These are groups who both had an interest in plotting against Jesus.

So they wanted to trap him, and asked him a question that could have dire consequences with either "yes" or "no" option that they provided - Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?

Jesus is not about to put up with their trap, and calls this group "hypocrites!". Instead, he responds in a way that has significant implications, both in his time, and even for us today.

The Pharisees and Herodians thought only in divided ways - this one or the other one. They asked a question that they believed had a clear yes or no answer that was wrong either way, hence the trap. They thought in terms of transaction, that giving money made you lawful to just one thing or another, that you get this for that, a seemingly even exchange.

Even in their banding together, the Pharisees and Herodians acted out of a place of division - this time their united division against their perceived threat, Jesus.

Jesus provides us another way. A third way. One not determined by a duality or divisiveness. The way determined by God, the creator of all that was, and is, and is to come.

So what is it that belongs to God? What is God's that we must give to God?

To put it simply, everything belongs to God. We are here because of God. Because God created this good and beautiful world that we are part of, we therefore belong to God as part of God's beloved creation.

This sense of everything belonging to God comes alongside the third way that Jesus provides for us out of divisiveness. God doesn't create us in division or duality, God creates us as part of the whole body, the body of Christ in which each person has gifts and skills given by the Holy Spirit that makes them the human they are. God creates us as His beloved children, out of love and the breath of life, the Holy Spirit. And God's creation, is good. God calls God's creation from the earliest, formless voids, into now, our beautiful, created selves, and continues to call us good. No human creation of division, of false narratives or systems of oppression will ever take away that reality of created goodness and belovedness. God loves all of us, God's children, God's creation, and it is our responsibility as people who proclaim the risen Lord Jesus to act in the ways of love too. Our love from God is not dependent on our actions, but our truth in living out the good news of Jesus is dependent on loving God and our neighbors.

God does not expect an even transaction with us in faith or in our lives. God is generous beyond our comprehension. So generous that a simple transaction with a coin and a leader is not even close to enough. God gives us commandments to follow that give glory and honor to God and give us life and new life every single day. This often seems to us less straightforward because it's not an even transaction. But that's just how big and great God's love for us truly is. God's love and generosity with us is greater and bigger than anything we could imagine, than anything we may deserve. God gives us life, creation, new life and hope, in and for all things simply out of God's goodness and love, and that love will always be here for us, and for all people.

Jesus offers us a different vision than the one our world tries to take us over with. He gives us a vision where different things can be accepted.

That what is due to the emperor can be given, but yet what is God's must be given to God as well.

Ultimately, we belong to God, and we have a responsibility to do as God commands. Our whole selves, our lives themselves, our entire created world and everything in it has been created by God, and therefore belongs to God. In our doing as God commands, we let God into our life in a very tangible way. When we let go of the transactional and limited ideas that threaten to trap us, we let God and God's life-saving, miraculous work. When we take action to pray and love and worship God as God commands, we nourish and take care of ourselves, what belongs to God. And when we do the work of loving our neighbors, in big and small ways, we bring this third way of Jesus' peace, of Jesus' inclusion, of Jesus' new life radically into our world. And that third way is the kingdom of heaven being brought closer to us, on earth as it is in heaven. Thanks be to God, Amen.