

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2017,

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

A little boy, who wanted \$100.00 very badly, prayed for two weeks but nothing happened. Then he decided to write GOD a letter requesting \$100.00. When the postal authorities received the letter to GOD, U.S.A., they decided to send it to the President. The President was so impressed, touched, and amused that he instructed his secretary to send the boy \$50.00. Mr. President thought that this would appear to be a lot of money to the little boy. The little boy was delighted with the \$50.00 and immediately sat down to write a thank you note to GOD that read: "Dear God, Thank you very much for sending me the money. However, I noticed that for some reason you had to send it through Washington, D.C., and, as usual, those devils took half of it."ⁱ

"Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" (or some variation thereof) is probably one of the most famous verses in the bible, and it can stand in for a whole host of meanings and allegories and metaphors and similes and short stories. Usually this time of year, in thousands of churches across Christendom, it is the basis for a sermon on tithing or stewardship, reminding us all how it is better to give than to receive. It finds its place near the end of the *Gospel of Matthew* as the Pharisees and Herodians try to craft a way to trip up Jesus and make him blaspheme in public so that they might find a way to have him arrested, either by the soldiers of Rome or by the Jewish religious police. (Blasphemy was a crime punishable by death.) Jesus, as always, is up to the fight, and gives them an answer they were not expecting. The question for us is, as it is every week, what effect is this story meant to have on our lives? What are we to learn from it, take from it, emulate in it? Or is it merely a story that has no deeper meaning? Other than the obvious query ("should we be paying taxes and to whom and for what and why?"), and issues concerning the separation of church and state, is there any other meaty food to chew on?

For me, this gospel lesson opens up the issue of what is of God vs. what is not. With this latest round of natural disasters still in the headlines (and likely to be so for quite some time), those who don't see them as either a weather effect or the results of global warming are quick to see God's hand in what has taken place. From the religious televangelists to the evangelical pundits on line, week after week we hear how these disasters such as the total utter destruction of Puerto Rico are the work of an angry God bent on punishing a sinful nation. "This happens in our country when we have taken God out of our schools and God out of our society. We don't have a moral standard," Franklin Graham, the son of Billy Graham said. Even the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Jr. was quoted as saying "God is responsible for this and in his own time he will reveal why." American Christians have often seen the hand of God behind natural disasters, religious experts say. "Probably half of the US population believes that a divine power sends judgment through hurricanes, floods and natural disasters," said John Green, a senior fellow with the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, a Washington think tank. "The basic idea that God is in charge and he expects people to behave and he isn't happy when they don't - that's a very

common idea," Green said. A small number of Christians believe that the United States needs to support Israel in order to bring about the return of Christ, says William Lawrence, dean of the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. "Those who hold such a view would tend to see any cataclysmic act as a sign of punishment."ⁱⁱ As if Israel did not have enough of its own to worry about...

Of course, those who play the other hand scoff at any such ideas. The liberal publication *Christianity Today* had a recent fascinating article called "How Do You Solve a Theological Problem Like Maria?" (for those non-theater types, it's an allusion to the song from *The Sound of Music*). Ed Brown, who oversees creation care efforts for the Lausanne Movement, warns against seeing worsening storms as a result of God's wrath. He is concerned, as might we all be, when praying to Jesus does not manage to calm the storm, as in the gospels. "A balanced theology of creation care accepts that God created a world in which the events that we call 'natural disasters' have a normal role to play," he said. "Hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanoes, and the like are a normal and necessary part of the natural order, and we should not see them as judgment or punishment."

Our country's economic downturn diminished the Word of Faith prosperity gospel boom that took off during the 1990s and 2000s, and he sees a shift away from efforts to "bribe" God into blessings and toward a greater understanding of a God of grace who extends blessings freely. "This present hurricane season is bringing the people back to the biblical, sound view of God. God is sovereign, good, and merciful, but is not our servant; we are his servants. Now we can understand the verses of the *Epistle to the Romans* regarding the days of comfort and the days of suffering: Both are his will, and both are for our wellbeing and for his glory," he writes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Such efforts to explain God's presence in suffering have actually been shown to help victims of natural disasters. Researchers including Jamie Aten, founder of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute at Wheaton College, discovered that when faith traditions offer people a meaningful way to understand a tragedy, they are more likely to cope with massive material losses and regain a sense of agency amid trauma.

In an article published last year in the journal *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, the researchers concluded that "although disasters that are particularly severe and cause substantial resource loss can elicit greater mental health distress and PTSD symptoms, to the extent that survivors can find spiritual meaning in such events, the deleterious effects of disasters on mental health functioning may be reduced."^{iv} In other words, if we can see that God is present, not in the hurricane, but in the suffering, we feel better about ourselves and the difficulties life presents. This in itself is linked to the religious philosophical context of *theodicy*, or the attempt to answer the question of why a good God permits the manifestation of evil.

Though it may seem that I have stepped far away from render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, it's because I believe the discussion leads us also to where and how God is present in the midst of

suffering, mainly because we are talking about what is God's realm and what is ours. All of humanity knows something about suffering. Some, especially in war-torn regions, know more than we will ever experience; some in those same areas have known nothing other than suffering at the hands of relentless enemies, often their own countryfolk and extended family members. I thought about this when I heard a news report the other day about how long we have had troops in Afghanistan - - nearly twenty years - - to the extent that an entire generation in that region has experienced civil war with children growing into young adulthood never knowing a moment of peace. Although they worship in a way that may seem foreign to us, they are praying to the same God. What does their theology look like? How do they reconcile their lives to a loving God of peace, if indeed they see things in this manner? Do Sunni Muslims, who make up 90% of the country, adhere to the tenets of their religion that Islam does not promote terrorism or the killing of people? How do any of us in any country deal with the radicalization of our religion? While I can't speak for others, I've found answers in the Scripture that I was raised with and have embraced as an adult Christian pastor. Though the bible can be used, as I've pointed out in the past, to justify anything, it does contain many comforting verses that speak to the God who is in our midst in all things. I think especially of these verses: The Book of *Psalms*, chapter 34, verse 18, tells us, "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." "God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble" says Psalm 46. "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest...for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" *Matthew* reminds us. "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" Paul writes in *Romans*. And as a child of God, we're invited to cast all our anxieties on God, because God cares for us (so says *1 Peter* 5:7).

So you see, there is so much that comes out of that coin toss the religious leaders tried to goad Jesus into, from a discussion of taxes to a surety that God is with us in all things and in all ways. It reminds me of a cute little story about a group of children who were lined up in the cafeteria of a Catholic elementary school for lunch. At the head of the table was a large pile of apples. The nun made a note, and posted it on the apple tray:

"Take only ONE. God is watching."

Moving further along the lunch line, at the other end of the table was a large pile of chocolate chip cookies.

A child had written a note, "Take all you want. It's okay! God is only watching the apples."^v

What do you think? Does the render unto Caesar gospel, which is supposed to represent the good news of God in Jesus Christ, speak in any way to you? I think it must, or we could not use vocabulary such as faith, hope, and love as found in Paul's *First Letter to the Thessalonians* that we heard earlier. After all, what would these words mean absent a loving, omnipresent God?

I was taught in seminary that any sermon worth its salt should include a call to action. As I mentioned, most Christians today are being called to consider their time, talent, and treasure

to further the work of their congregation and the church-at-large. As worthy as this call is, and as necessary as it might be, even for a church like BBCC that has few financial worries (praise God!), might we in addition to our giving and our holding up each other in prayer consider recognizing daily the presence of God in all whom we meet, the *Namaste* of the Hindu tradition that I mentioned in my sermon a few weeks ago. After all, we never know when we might be in the presence of angels, as Sarah discovered in *Genesis 18* when they came for dinner presenting themselves unawares on their way to those two infamous cities of sin. If I can see God at work in you, and you will acknowledge the work of God in me, what wondrous life-changing discussions we will have. We may even discover that we are the same side of the infamous coin of Scripture, having more in common and more to share than we had ever imagined.

I leave you today with one final Caesarean “moneywise plea,” to coin a phrase, from the inspirational writer Israelmore Ayivor, who says, “True compassion does not sit on the laps of renovation; it dives with an approach to reconstruction. Don't throw a coin at a beggar. Rather, destroy the source of his poverty.”^{vi} For to do good and distribute forget not, for with such sacrifices, God is well-pleased (*Hebrews 16:13*). Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr., Pastor, BBCC

ⁱ http://jokes.christiansunite.com/Politics/Render_Unto_Caesar.shtml

ⁱⁱ <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/hurricane-is-gods-work-christian-extremists/2005/09/03/1125302770141.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Kate Shellnutt at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/september/how-solve-problem-maria-irma-hurricane-theodicy-caribbean.html>

^{iv} Ibid.

^v <https://ah69.wordpress.com/2012/08/07/is-the-god-everywhere/>

^{vi} <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/coin>