Sunday, October 25, 2026
Reformation Sunday

Will Rogers, the actor and humorist, once remarked that the only difference between death and taxes is that death doesn't get worse every time Congress meets. I would add that death also doesn't come with a 400-page instruction booklet. Taxes are the bane of our daily existence, and they always happen, and they always will be, yes?

In Jesus's day, the Jewish people paid roughly 30 to 40% of their income and produce to Rome and the temple. Oh, there are grain tolls, there are sales taxes, there are customs and transit taxes, temple taxes, tithes, offerings, plus all the illegal extortion tax collectors got away with. People dislike tax collectors then as now, yet the gospels go out of their way to show Jesus spending time with them. He invited himself to the home of Zacchaeus, he chose Levi, also called Matthew, as an apostle. He paid his and Peter's temple tax and still his enemies accused him of forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor as part of their scheme to try to get him killed.

Today's gospel is about a tax paid to Rome. It was a hated reminder to Israel that Israel was a conquered nation paying for its own occupation. The temple authorities had chosen to cooperate with Rome, and they got a kickback for it. Many faithful Jews refused to pay and got themselves into trouble. So, we get to these biblical frenemies, the Pharisees, the religious separatists, and the Herodians, the defenders of the ruling class and the status quo. Here they team up against the common enemy Jesus with this no-win question. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? The tax equaled a laborer's daily wage and had to be paid by the Roman denarius. One side of the coin bore the emperor's face and the other inscription claiming divine powers for Caesar. So, you can imagine for many devout people even carrying this coin broke the commandment against idols. Jesus' answer stuns them. Whose image is on this coin? Caesar's. So, give this to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God what is God's. So, we see how Jesus turns this trap around. The real question isn't what we owe Caesar, it is what we owe God. The denarius carries the emperor's face. But the face of God cannot be seen as Moses learned on the mountain. He prayed, "Show me your glory." And God

answers, "No one can see God's face and live, yet God's character can be traced through the goodness, graciousness, and mercy."

And we are made, are we not? We are made in God's image and likeness, we are stamped with that same goodness, graciousness and mercy. In essence, we are like that coin in Jesus' hand. We are God's currency on earth, breathing, living coins, and we get to decide how and what our lives will fund. We fund our families, our education, our work, our homes, our food. We fund our entertainment, the movies, books and vacations. That's all well and good. But the tax, God places on us, is service and care for our neighbors. We give back to God by giving to others.

Paul puts it this way, "Owe no one anything except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." That is how we show the world God's unseeable face. We owe this debt of love, and we pay it in how we treat our community, our church, the stranger, the outcast, the sick, and the needy.

Let me share with you a story I once heard, maybe you've heard it, or maybe something like it. Dana had just finished a double shift at her job. She was stopping for gas on the way home, exhausted with her ear buds in, scrolling on her phone at the pump. At the next pump, a young man was standing beside an old car, staring at his card reader, and it said, "Declined." Dana's first instinct was efficient and honestly kind. She'd Venmo him $20, nod, and be on her way, problem solved. She had her thumb on the screen, and she took out her earbud and said to him, "Hey, you okay?" He wasn't. He wasn't really asking for money. He had just been laid off in August on the verge of losing his apartment and he was too ashamed to say it out loud to anybody. You can imagine how. He said, "I just don't want her, meaning his daughter, to see me like this." Dana put her phone down. She filled his tank, and then she sat with him on the curb there and made a few calls. One thing led to another, and, over time, doors opened, and eventually this young man got back on his feet and found housing. It wasn't easy, it wasn't immediate,

but Dana's initial calls got this ball rolling, and she confessed, "I almost just handed him the money so that I wouldn't have to see him." I think that's the temptation for all of us. Money is the easy way out. Giving is good and necessary, but sometimes a tap on the screen lets us skip the harder gift of looking someone in the eye and seeing the face of God there. She was tired, and that was understandable. We all get tired, but God had put someone in front of her to receive the love she owed.

Here's something about coins that's easy to forget. They're made to be spent. A coin sitting in a jar on your dresser isn't doing anything. It might be shiny or worth something, but it isn't doing what it was made for. A coin only becomes what it is when it moves, when it passes from hand to hand to buy bread or pay a debt or cover somebody's bus fare. And the same is true for us. Some of us are sitting in a jar. We're safe, comfortable, we're counted, but we're not going anywhere. God didn't mint us to save us. God minted us to be spent.

So, what will this look like when we start off the week tomorrow on Monday? It looks like maybe taking out that earbud and asking a co-worker, "Hey, how are you doing?" And waiting for the answer. It looks like sitting with a neighbor whose spouse has died and the casseroles have stopped coming. It looks like learning the name of the person who rings up your groceries. None of that shows up as a tax form and none of it gets you a deduction. But it is the currency that God has asked us to spend, and God has given us plenty of it. That is giving back to God what is God's, a person seen, a life restored.

That's our tax, my friends, not to Caesar, but to God whose image we carry. It's paid in time, in attention, in the mercy we show, and it's paid to the neighbor who sits right in front of us. We make God's glory visible through our deeds, our witness, and our gifts. We are God's divine currency, passed from hand to hand to our neighbors. Amen.