

“We Belong to God”
September 20, 2026

Romans 14:1-9
Matthew 22:15-22

When the Vacation Bible School was held in late August, our Christian Education Director, Hope Spragg, and the other teachers led the children and youth in developing an understanding of what it means to “belong.” I was able to join them for a while one evening and we talked about belonging to families, belonging to groups.

We talked about belonging to this congregation as well. From what they said, it was clear that even at their young age, they have a strong feeling that they belong here. And I felt so good knowing that all of you have nurtured in them the sense that they are a part of this community. That doesn’t happen in every congregation—but it does happen here.

As we moved into September, that evening with the Vacation Bible School led me to think further about belonging. So last Sunday’s sermon looked at belonging to a congregation.

This morning, the scripture lessons invite us to look beyond our belonging to and with one another in this congregation. Paul affirms “Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

We belong to God.

Of course, Paul says this as he writes about life within a congregation, with all of its irritations and difficulties, all of its consolations and possibilities.

Some members of that early congregation in Rome would eat anything; others were vegetarians. Some thought one day or another was better; others thought all days were the same. And because the congregation was made up of, well, *people*, arguments broke out over who was right, who was wrong.

Nonsense! Paul says. There is no reason to judge one another. There is no reason to despise someone because of what they eat or don’t eat. Petty disagreements over little issues waste time and breath.

This problem, of course, was not confined to ancient Rome. John Calvin said that we are all “readily inclined to slide from difference of opinion into dispute and controversy.”¹

You all know individuals and congregations that act as though they didn’t get this memo.

Ours is a congregation, however, that has taken those words of Paul to heart. We recognize, as one translation puts it: “The life and death of each of us has its influence on others.” This is a community of connection. And so, we have developed a style of belonging that is characterized by respect for one another and a readiness to accept differences in the ways we express our faith.

But there is something more than the connection we have with each other and the influence we have on each other. Paul puts it this way: “if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to

the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." We belong to one another, yes. And more importantly, we belong to the God who has been made known in Jesus Christ.

With Paul, with Christians over the millennia, we affirm that we are the Lord's. That faith empowers our living because it sustains us even in our dying. "For this end," Paul concludes, "Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living."

Stay with me here, because this is more than the empty religious talk that we Congregationalists can be so wary of. We are confronted here with a central reality of the Christian life—the power of the resurrection for our lives as individuals and as a congregation. Because we belong to God, because we are held in God's care even in our dying, we can be courageous in our living.

The power of the resurrection is the ability to act in a world of death and destruction. In the resurrection we come to believe that even though this world can seem at times so obviously filled with evil and injustice, as others have affirmed, the arc of the universe is long but that it moves toward justice. We can truly act "in faith," that is, trusting that the ultimate direction of creation is toward God's good purposes for all of life.

The power of the resurrection comes not through our own positive thinking or by our strenuous efforts. This power arises out of God's vindication of the suffering and death of Jesus in the resurrection, in which we see by faith that even at the moment of great suffering and death, God was at work bringing life. By that same faith we claim that God continues to bring life out of death, hope out of despair today. This is the power that sets us free to love with abandon, to act even when fear presses in, to draw out the best in ourselves and other people.

We affirm the good news that we are—at all times—held in God's love.

Because we belong to Christ who is Lord of both the dead and the living, our own lives can exhibit the kind of orientation toward the future that is hope.

Now, we should not confuse hope with the wishful thinking expressed when we say something like: "I hope it won't rain this afternoon" when we have no control over the weather whatsoever, or "I hope I'll do well on the test," when one hasn't studied or prepared whatsoever.

Nor does hope that grows out of belonging to God brush the sorrow or the suffering of life aside. It takes our sadness and grief seriously and speaks of a future that God is even now bringing into being. Out of such hope, we can face our own sadness and the suffering of the world.

This is, yes, a *religious* hope, one that grows out of a sense that our lives—however brief or long, however filled with sadness or happiness, however wealthy or impoverished—our lives are lived in the presence of God who breathes the breath of life into each of us and all of us. *Religious* hope trusts that God's new day is dawning even as the world and our lives are surrounded by so many shadows. It grows from a sense that we belong, not just to one another, but to God.

Which brings us to the words of Jesus that are no doubt familiar to many—although, as always, I hope that some have heard them for the first time—or for the first time have heard them in all of their surprising, life-giving power.

Here we get some help from Rabbi Arthur Waskow. He tells of a rabbi living under the Roman Empire who said: “When Caesar puts his image on a coin, all the coins come out identical. When the One who is beyond all rulers puts the divine image on a ‘coin,’ all the coins come out unique.” Each human being—you, me—is a unique coin.

Keep that in mind as we watch and listen as some Pharisees approach Jesus in Jerusalem. They’ve rounded up a few Herodians—and we don’t really know much about who those people were. They apparently supported the royal family and their interests were most likely secular.

Pharisees and Herodians—religious leaders and civic boosters—approach Jesus and ask: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

Good question—and not one with an easy answer.

If Jesus answers “No” he could be considered guilty of fomenting revolution.

If Jesus answers “Yes” he will seem to be siding with the government that was occupying Israel and oppressing his own people.

But you’ve read the Bible enough to know that Jesus rarely gives a “Yes” or “No” answer.

Instead, on this occasion, Jesus asks for a coin and asks his own question: “Whose face and whose name is on the coin?”

And there is the answer: the image of Caesar stamped on the coin along with the inscription, “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus.” Since Caesar’s image is on the coin, it must belong to him.

Then, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.

That might have settled the issue.

But as we have seen so often, Jesus is not one to leave well enough alone.

So, Rabbi Waskow imagines Jesus putting his hand on the shoulders of one of the troublemakers and asking: “And whose image is on *this* ‘coin?’”ⁱⁱ That is, whose image is on this human being?

Perhaps Jesus paused and then concluded: “Give to God the things that are God’s.”

Give to God the things that are God’s.

With those eight words, everything changes—our understanding of who we are, our understanding of what we have, and our understanding of what our lives are about.

The things that are God’s.

Our understanding of who we are changes.

In faith we affirm that we are—each one of us as individuals and all humankind together—created in the image of God. This understanding, of course, goes back as far as Genesis. Since the time of the early theologian, Tertullian, in the second century, Christians have imagined that we have the image of the living God stamped upon us. And in the twentieth century, the great preacher, George Buttrick, suggested that each individual life is like a coin, separately minted in God's creation.ⁱⁱⁱ

We are God's coins, creatures who bear the image of the Creator. We are free people who are able to freely respond to the love of God. We are free people who in surprising ways are in control of our own lives. We are free to love or hate, to build up or tear down.

We are created in the image of God—and therefore, Jesus suggests, we belong to God. And we should give to God the things that are God's—our very selves in all their created glory.

When we listen to Jesus, our understanding of who we are changes.

The things that are God's.

When we listen to Jesus, our understanding of what we have changes.

What is it that we have that belongs to God?

If we speak from faith, we will answer "Everything."

We are creatures of the One in whom we live and move and have our being. Our life and all that gives it value—family and friends, love and desire, skill and beauty—all belong to God. Our life and all that occupies our attention—our work, our money, our time, our abilities—all belong to God as well.

Everything is given to us by God and belongs to God. We simply hold these gifts in trust. All things come from God and we have the great opportunity to use what we have with wisdom and out of love.

When we listen to Jesus, our understanding of what we have changes.

The things that are God's.

When we listen to Jesus, our understanding of what life is about changes.

A life that matters reflects the gratitude of our hearts.

God gives much. Yet in that very giving there is a need created that God can in no way meet—our need to give thank. It is up to us to fill that need.

When we thank God for the many gifts we have received, we are involving ourselves in God's great gift of being.

When we listen to Jesus, our understanding of what life is about changes.

The things that are God's: you and me.

In life and in death, we *belong* to God.

So, give to God the things that belong to God—all that you are and all that you have received from so good and gracious a hand.

ⁱ Calvin, Commentary on Romans 14:1.

ⁱⁱ Arthur Waskow, "Torturing the Image of God," <http://www.shalomctr.org/node/1504>

ⁱⁱⁱ George Buttrick in commentary on text in *Interpreter's Bible*.