May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

 “*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s*”. It sounds simple enough. It sounds like we should be able to just take a piece of paper, divide it into two columns, one for God and one for our emperors, and start making our list. That’s often how this text gets interpreted and applied. We hear Jesus saying there is God’s stuff and the there is the emperor’s stuff. Then we try to divide our life and world between church and state, religion and politics, sacred and secular, saved and damned, tithe and taxes, spirit and matter, heaven and earth, humanity and divinity as if they are completely separate and unrelated, as if they are in opposition and have nothing to do with each other.

The only thing that brings the Pharisees and Herodians together is their shared dislike of Jesus. They come to Jesus with a question. “*Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?*” They want to know whose side Jesus is on, the emperor’s or God’s. It’s a trap, a set up. Whichever way Jesus answers the question he will have incriminated himself with either the Pharisees or Rome.

We too often fragment and classify our lives. So we have our prayer life, our religious life, our family life, our political life, our love life, our work life, our economic life. We talk and live as if there is no integrity or coherence between them. When we do we end up excluding God from a large part of our lives and our world.

I don’t think Jesus is splitting our lives or our world. He is not asking us to divide our loyalties or classify our lives. Instead he is holding before us the reality of God and the reality of our emperors. Both are real. Both are a part of our lives and our world. Jesus is asking us to step into and live in the tension of those two realities. That’s what he did. That’s where he lived. To stand in that place is to stand with Jesus. That’s where life gets real. That’s where life is really lived. It is neither a comfortable nor an easy place to be. There are no easy answers.

So, what would go in God’s column? What would go in the emperor’s column? What criteria determine whether something is God’s or the emperor’s? Are God and the emperor mutually exclusive, always in opposition? Is the emperor always bad? Must we choose one over the other? Who is God in our life? Who are our emperors?

I don’t have any answers. I can’t tell you what to do but I can stand with you in the tension of God and the emperor and you can stand with me. That struggle, the tension of living with and between God and my emperors, continually pushes me inward, to examine my life, to reflect on who I am, what I do, and whose image and title I bear.

I wonder if that’s Jesus intention in today’s gospel. Maybe when we recognize, accept, and struggle with this impossible to solve problem, maybe that’s when we really begin to follow Jesus. We stop searching for answers and begin seeking life. That’s when and where the church has something to say, faith makes a difference, and lives are changed.

To simply divide life between the empire and God is too simplistic, too easy. It avoids the struggle. It is an over simplification of Jesus’ life, your life and my life, the beauty of God, and the holiness of creation.

“*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s*.” Amen.