

Pentecost 20A October 18 2020  
Matthew 22:15-22  
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth  
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Grace and peace to you, Beloved of the Lord, from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*'Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away' (Matthew 22:15-22).*

In today's Gospel lesson, the Pharisees are looking for payback. They're angry, fearful, suspicious, perhaps a bit embarrassed. They're gunning for Jesus.

Jesus has been rattling the cages of the establishment and the religious leaders, pretty hard. It's Holy Week in today's gospel. Jesus rides into town and goes to the temple where he drives out the merchants and overthrows the money changers' tables. Then he calls everyone a bunch of thieves. To make matters worse he heals the lame and blind. That really makes the chief priests and scribes angry. "Who do you think you are?" "By what authority are you doing these things," they ask him. Jesus doesn't answer them. Instead he says that they're like disobedient children, worse than the very people they judge and condemn as disobedient. But he doesn't stop there.

Jesus tells the Pharisees a story about tenants of a vineyard who steal from the landlord and murder his son. They realise he is not talking about tenants of a vineyard. He is talking about them. The Pharisees decide to sort Jesus out but they're scared of the crowds. Jesus is on a roll and tells them another story. This one is about a wedding banquet, the kind they would be invited to. But the story doesn't end the way they expect. One of the guests gets tied up and thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Enough is enough. The religious leaders go away and cook up a plan to trap Jesus using his own words. Things have become so desperate for the Pharisees that they bring in the Herodians for back-up. They actually join forces with the party that supports Rome's domination of their own people! Politics, anger, fear, and suspicion are indeed a dangerous and untrustworthy combination.

Jesus' opponents are "silver-tongues." They start with flattery. "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one." They're softening Jesus up; hoping to lure him into their fiendish trap. "Tell us, then, what you think," they ask. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Now this is a tricky, or, loaded question, much the same as if I were to ask you something like, "Have you given up picking your nose yet?" If you say yes, you're admitting that you used to pick your nose. Gross! If you say no, you're admitting that you still pick your nose. Again, gross! It's a yucky question, isn't it, designed to trap or embarrass you, (so I won't ask it).

"Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" If Jesus says yes, he risks offending and losing his followers and all those for whom Roman taxation is a daily reminder that they are dominated by a foreign power in their own land. If he says no, he risks being charged with insurrection and treason. And don't forget, Rome's supporters, the Herodians, are there as witnesses.

What we must understand is that this question isn't about taxes, the government, Roman occupation of the Jews, or the separation of church and state. It's about an agenda. The Pharisees and Herodians don't care what the answer is. Either way they've got Jesus cornered. Or so they think.

The questions may be different but the Pharisaic-Herodian collaboration is still a part of our world today. It's played out every time we over-simplify complex issues, categorise people, pigeon-hole parts of our lives, and try to manipulate Jesus.

Is homosexuality lawful? Say yes and you will be labelled a gospel reductionist, a progressive who denies the authority of Holy Scripture. Say

no and you will be accused of being homophobic, prejudiced, and denying the gospel's message of love and inclusivity.

Is abortion permissible? Say yes and you will be seen as supporting the killing of babies, one who ignores the commandment against murder. Say no and you are accused of oppressing a woman's right to autonomy over her own body.

Do you support sending Australian soldiers to fight in the West's ubiquitous "war on terror"? Say no and you will be seen as unpatriotic and failing to support our country. Say yes and you risk having to answer for the violence, death, and destruction that seem so contrary to Jesus' life and teaching.

In whatever form it takes, the Pharisaic-Herodian scheme is about power, manipulation, and agendas. That always destroys relationships and undermines faith. Sadly, that's all too evident today in our political and economic systems as well as in our churches.

Jesus, however, will not allow himself to be used, manipulated, or co-opted by anyone: the Pharisees, the Herodians, or us. He asks them whose image is on the tax coin. "The emperor's," they answer. "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." I can hear the lawyer in them saying, "Objection, your honour. The answer is unresponsive. The question calls for a yes or no answer."

But Jesus refuses to play games. He doesn't answer their question in the way they want. Instead, he deepens the question and turns it into a question of faith and life. If the coin belongs to the emperor then the human being belongs to God. Each has been marked with the image of its owner. We have been coined in the image of God. As it says in our Baptismal Rite:

"The word of God teaches that we are born sinful and unclean, but God washes us clean in the waters of baptism, and we are born again as **his** children. Through baptism our heavenly Father forgives us our sins and unites us with our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we share in his death and resurrection. And the Holy Spirit renews us and gives us **eternal** life."

Dear Friends, as I shared with the Wednesday morning gathering, “You are the Body of Christ!”

So knowing this, what does faithfulness look like in the issues we struggle with every day? That’s a hard question. For all of us it’s the work of a lifetime. Jesus doesn’t offer simple yes or no type answers. So I’m not expecting you to, either. Faithfulness demands more than that. We’re continually learning to surrender and render to: God, ourselves, and one another. How will we do that for ourselves, those we love, our neighbour, our enemy? The key is knowing to whom we belong. It’s one of those answers, however, that takes a lifetime to learn. Faithfulness is more about struggle and practice than it is an answer. It’s done at the depths of our image. When we get the image right, everything else follows.

There will always be issues to address: taxes, economics, church-state relationships, homelessness, drugs, violence, intolerance, discrimination, war, capital punishment, social distancing, personal finances, marriage, children, doubt... the list is endless. Some are global while others are more local and personal. The danger is that in getting distracted by the issues, we sometimes forget in whose image we and our “neighbours” have been coined.

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Jesus isn’t separating the secular and the sacred, spirit and matter, divine and human. He’s inviting us to hold them in tension; to learn how to unite the two and as we do, be the currency of God’s mission to the world. On that note, I’d like to leave you with these words, and, I pray that they will encourage you as Paul encouraged the “Thessalonians.”

‘Christ has no body now, but yours. No hands, no feet on earth, but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks compassion into the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which Christ blesses the world’ (Saint Teresa of Avila). God bless you, Body of Christ. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.