

Sermon  
October 18, 2020  
Matthew 22:15-22

At first glance it seems pretty clear, black and white even. This passage from Matthew is familiar and often quoted. It may be more familiar in the version from the King James Version of the Bible; "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's". Our civil responsibilities are separate from our church or spiritual responsibilities. It seems to help us make sense of our life of faith and our secular life, this and that. In many ways it was no different in Jesus' day. Generally people, then and now like to have the answers clear, lines drawn and, really who doesn't like to be right? There may be another way to look at this, however, one that both Jesus and his challengers clearly understood that is a bit more allusive to us.

The authorities in the Temple continue in their attempts to ensnare or trap Jesus. To get rid of this man who is unsettling the power that gives the Pharisees control over the people. At this point the Pharisees, the authorities on Jewish law and its implementation into daily life, and the Herodians, those who support the rule of Rome and the Emperor, have joined forces. Normally they would have definitely been in opposite corners of the ring. In fact, I think the Pharisees are getting a bit gun shy confronting Jesus because our text says they sent their disciples and didn't go themselves. Both groups, however, now see value for themselves in the arrest and riddance of Jesus. So again, Jesus is asked a question that, in the minds of these two groups will trap him one way or another. The question is: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" "If Jesus says that it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, he alienates the people who hate the Roman occupation and its Caesar. If he says it is unlawful to pay taxes, the people will be pleased, but Jesus will then be liable for arrest by the Romans." (Clayton Schmidt, WorkingPreacher) That is surely a trap from which he cannot escape....so they think.

Jesus is completely aware that this is again an attempt to snag him. He hears their insincerity in the flattery, "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." Jesus replies, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?" You hypocrites, you know the way of God and you act in this manner! He has called them out on their turf, in what they know to be the truth. He takes the next step and asks for a denarius. The coin used for collecting taxes. "Whose head is on this, and whose title?" he asks. "The emperor's," they said, for the coin bears the image of the emperor and bears the inscription *Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Augustus*. And Jesus says, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." The answer given.....trap evaded and the line drawn.....or is it?

"When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away?" Were they amazed that once again he answered their question in such a way that left him free or did they really know something else?

Let's take a look at how Luther understood this text. Erick J Thompson, a Lutheran pastor and contributor to online preaching resources says this: "This text is about righteousness, but Jesus evades the trap set for him by talking about two different authorities that one must respond to: the civil authorities and God. In the preface to his 1535 Commentary on Galatians, Martin Luther talks about two kinds of righteousness: Civil Righteousness and Spiritual (Alien) Righteousness. For Luther, our civil righteousness was something we worked on and something we were accountable for. Civil righteousness is achieved by how we act in society. But, our spiritual righteousness regards our relationship with God and, for Luther, is determined not by our actions, but by God's love in Christ. It is sometimes called alien righteousness because we could no more increase or earn that righteousness than we could live on the moon. In some ways, Jesus is using similar categories to respond to the question posed to him.

By calling attention to the different obligations we have, Jesus is reminding us of the differences that exist for us as citizens of the state and citizens of heaven. Jesus carefully suggests that we owe the state exactly what is demanded of us, in this case, the coin with Caesar's head on it. By contrasting that with his exhortation to give unto God what is God's, Jesus is exposing the irony of the Pharisees and Herodians' religious activities; they are more concerned with their own power than they are with honoring God." (Pastor Erick J Thompson, WorkingPreacher, Luther Seminary)

Imagine it this way; two separate circles that call on us, one is about our allegiance to our society and government and the other is about our allegiance to our spiritual life, church and God. There is another way, at least one, of understanding this text, wherein, I believe, lies greater grace and power.

Let's go back to the text. First of all, who were the Pharisees? The Pharisees were experts in their knowledge of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. They were the ones to pass on to the people the laws of the Torah and traditions as they would be applied to the lives of the people in their current context. They knew the Books of the Law and the contents of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy better than any of us possibly could. Jesus as a Rabbi, a teacher, also knew these texts deeply.

So Jesus, again put on the spot, asks for a coin, the denarius, the coin that is used exclusively for the collection of the poll or imperial tax that funded the Roman occupation. Someone from the confronting team provides it to him. Hmm, first of all, what are they doing with the coin in the temple for it bears a graven image, which is forbidden in the Temple. Secondly, if they have a coin, they are paying the tax. Why then ask the question? But Jesus puts that all aside, he doesn't call them on blasphemy or disloyalty, instead he calls them hypocrites, "those who have quite literally taken to wearing another, and false, likeness" (David Lose). Maybe what's really happening here is that they have forgotten whose they are, in whose image or likeness they have been created. Maybe it's really a case of amnesia. For all of those people in this debate would have known intimately Genesis 1:26, "Then God said, 'Let us

make humankind (in Hebrew *adam*) in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

“Pause for a moment to let that sink in. We were made in the image and likeness of God, and because we bear God’s likeness we are to act like God. Not mind you, like *gods*, those who lord their authority over others for self-gain, but rather like *God* – the One who creates and sustains and nurtures and redeems and saves...no matter what the cost. We are called, that is, to serve as God’s agents, God’s partners, and God’s co-workers and co-creators, exercising dominion over creation not as an act of power but rather as an act of stewardship and extending to all the abundant life God wishes for all.”

Even the man, Caesar Augustus, whose image was on the denarius was created in the image and likeness of God.

“To whom do we really belong? Take a look at any person. Whose inscription is on him or her? Each is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). There can be no doubt, then, what Jesus means here. Give yourselves to God because it is to him that you belong.

It is God who claims us, who made us in his own image. We do not belong to anything or to anyone else. We don't even belong to ourselves. We belong to God in all our being, with all our talents, interests, time, and wealth. "We give thee but thine own, whatever the gift may be. All that we have is thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from thee."<sup>1</sup> (David Lose)

“The consequences of belonging to God are remarkable. First, it means that God will not forsake us. The Pharisees and the other religious leaders that Jesus denounce were notoriously bad at caring for the people. They gave up their responsibilities and the people God gave into their care. They deserved condemnation. But, God does not abandon God’s own.

Second, it means that because we belong to God, we belong to the people of God, the body of Christ. If there is any alienation, it is our own doing. And, if we return, God is there, as always.

Third, it means that we give to God that which belongs to God's: that is, we give ourselves. We take the sacred trust and invest it in lives of worship. Sometimes, that worship occurs privately, in devotion. Sometimes, in church with our brothers and sisters in Christ. And the rest of the time, it occurs in the sphere of daily work and service. All of this is worship. Ultimately, giving ourselves to God means that we give ourselves to the world.” (Clayton Schmidt) A world that God created and declared good. God created us as social beings that need one another. As images and likenesses of God we always, in every context, are called to remember whose we are and make choices that reflect God’s creative, compassionate, nurturing, redeeming and just nature, whether in our worshipping community or as citizens voting for leadership of our provincial community.

Those two circles I spoke about earlier, one designating our civil righteousness and the other our spiritual righteousness are really one within the other. All our decisions and efforts to be good citizens, good neighbours, good employees, good parents, fall within our being made in the image and likeness of God and born as a child of God. It's not easy, by any means, but God does not abandon us when we make mistakes, when we don't get it right.

"When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away?" I would propose that when they heard Jesus reply, that verse from Genesis "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness....'" loomed large in their minds, for that nanosecond of amazement the amnesia disappeared and they knew in whose image and likeness they and all people were created. And they knew to whom they belonged, and it was not to Caesar Augustus, nor were they to be the gods of the Temple lording over the people "and [then] they left him, and walked away."

We have responsibilities to care for one another, our communities, our world and the earth. God created us in God's image and likeness to do so. We have the tools to do that, money is just one of them.

Amen