

October 22, 2023
Pentecost 20 – Proper 24A
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Exodus 33:12-23

Psalms 99

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

In the Name of God: Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

For those of you who have come to church for years, I imagine that you hear today's admonition to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" as the launching pad for a stewardship sermon. Well, fear not. At least not today.

This morning, in the middle of chapter 22, Matthew's narrative continues to intensify. In Chapter 21 we saw Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, after which he immediately cleared the moneychangers out of the Temple. In the following days, during what we call Holy Week, Matthew gives us scenes of Jesus teaching in the Temple. During these public teachings, his authority is challenged by various groups of religious leaders – chief priests, elders, scribes, and Pharisees. Jesus responds to their challenges with parables – the parables we've heard over the past few weeks. The Parable of the Two Sons, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants and, last Sunday, the Parable of Wedding Banquet. If this had been a debate tournament, Jesus would have walked away with all the medals. His opponents, on the other hand, just walked away.

And so, we come to today's account. Matthew seems to give us a little theatre of the absurd, complete with an absurd plot, and stock heroes and bad guys. Apparently tired of losing every argument, the Pharisees were searching for the ultimate "gotcha" question, so they "went and plotted to entrap" Jesus. Plotted to entrap. The gloves were off, and a new ally comes on stage – the Herodians.

The Herodians, mentioned only twice in Mark,¹ and once here in Matthew, were supporters of Herod Antipas, a Jewish political leader who collaborated with the Romans. They were politically powerful, although their cooperation with Rome involved compromises in observing Mosaic Law.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were people who observed all the traditional standards and rituals of Judaism. They tithed. They were compassionate. They were moral. They were at the heart of virtue in the culture. And they opposed Rome's occupation.

¹ Mark 3:6 and 12:13.

Pharisees and Herodians together, Matthew tells us, plot to trap Jesus, asking that he take sides in their so-called dispute. If Jesus answers with the Pharisees, he shows himself to be an enemy of Rome. If he agrees with the Herodians, he offends popular Jewish religious sensibilities. In either case, he'd be in great danger – it is the ultimate “gotcha.”

The plotters begin with honeyed words, all smiles and sharp teeth: “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.”

Such fair words, but such foul intentions as they lay out their question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Jesus recognizes their malice immediately and challenges them. “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?” Jesus had been tested by the Devil during his forty-day fast in the wilderness. Now it is people who attempt to entrap him, and he calls them what they are: hypocrites. They have put themselves opposite the purposes of God.

Jesus then asks to see the coin used to pay the tax, and they hand him a denarius. I wonder if maybe there was still one on the ground from when Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple. Roman coins could not be used to pay the Temple tax.

A denarius is a silver coin, a day's wage for an ordinary laborer. The coin they showed Jesus probably depicted the reigning emperor, Tiberius. A typical coin of the time bore an image of the emperor and an inscription that read, “Tiberius Caesar, Augustus and Son of the Divine Augustus.” The Romans often claimed divinity for their emperors. Here, Tiberius is depicted as heir to his divine predecessor. The Romans gloried in these titles; the Jews were scandalized by them.

Jesus, like he does, turns the question back on them. “Whose head is this, and whose title?” The answer is obvious: the emperor's.

In his famous response, Jesus lifts the red herring of a sham tax controversy to a different level, far above the deadlock between revolutionary and collaborator. “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's,” Jesus said. In other words, you can pay him with coins like this. With his name and portrait on them, he has a just claim to them. “And” Jesus continues, “give to God the things that are God's.”

What belongs to God? Think about it for a minute. If the emperor claims a coin that bears his image, then certainly God has a claim on whatever bears God's image. Pharisees and Herodians alike knew the Scriptures. They know the Genesis account of God making humanity in the divine image.

It is right to pay the emperor taxes using coins with his image. But it is a greater responsibility to give God what bears God's image, namely oneself.

So Jesus shifts the scene from an attempt to entrap him in a tedious controversy to a recognition that, because each one is made in the divine image, each one is called upon to return their life to God.

Tiberius may have claimed to be the son of the divine Augustus. Our claim is that each human being is the child of the true King, Israel's God. Confronted with this inescapable conclusion, the Herodians and Pharisees slip away as quietly as they can – perhaps, we might hope, to a better life.²

Matthew's little bit of theatre does not answer every question about what it means to be both a citizen and a Christian. It does not resolve every quandary about obedience and taxation and resistance. It certainly does not tell us what political party to support. But it does make clear which questions must take primacy: Do I give myself to God? Am I in right relationship with God?

If the answer to these questions is "yes," then perhaps I can live justly in my other relationships, no matter how complex and challenging they may be. If the answer is "no," if I have somehow defrauded God, then everything else in my life will be off kilter, and I cannot live justly with others, however good my intentions.

We are wired in such a way that unless you do right by your most important relationship, you cannot do right by the rest. But if that most important relationship is somehow healed, somehow made whole, somehow repaired by the one who established it, that is to say by the gift of God's grace, then your other relationships might have a hope of being set right as well.

Think about what happens when you come here on a Sunday morning. Do you come seeking something? Do you come bringing something? I suspect that it's a combination for each of you. Before the pandemic, there was a more symbolically robust act of offering – of at least parts of ourselves – with gifts of bread and wine and money. In some places, an offertory sentence from the 1928 Prayerbook is still used: *All things come of Thee, O Lord, and of Thine own have we given Thee* (1 Chronicles 29:14).

But, if we are to take Jesus seriously, to offer to God the things that are God's, we might need to dig a little deeper. There's a wonderful phrase in the Eucharistic Prayers of Rite I that prays for God to "accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, whereby we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies."

Just sit with that for a moment. What would it mean to the world, to God's world, for you, for us, to be serious about offering to God "our selves, our souls and bodies"? How would it change the way you think about being a disciple of Jesus? How

² Deep thanks for the thoughts of the Rev. Charles Hoffacker in a 2005 sermon, "The Coin That God Wants."

would it affect the way you see the work that God has given you to do? How would it transform the way you love and serve God as a faithful witness of Christ to the world?

I'd like to think that we gather as a community of faith in this place, and at this Holy Table, out of the belief that Jesus Christ, at the cost of his life and by the power of his resurrection, sets right our primary relationship, sets right our connection with God, and in that gift of grace, empowers us with the hope of living justly in our other relationships as well. Render unto God the things that are God's. Amen.