

Sunday, October 18, 2020
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 24 (Year A)

Matthew 22.15-22

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/524886064522726/videos/390922555615151>

(Sermon begins at about 13:20)

“Whose Image?”

Today’s Gospel reading finds Jesus between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Now, he’s been in sticky situations before. In fact, this whole section of Matthew’s Gospel finds Jesus in one sticky situation after another in his dealings with the temple authorities. Just to set the stage, at this point in the Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus is in Jerusalem mere days before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. He had his triumphal entry just the day before and immediately went to the temple, where he proceeded to disrupt things by overturning the tables of the money changers and driving out those selling their goods in the temple complex. The next day, he returns to the temple to get into, or rather cause, what the late John Lewis called “Good Trouble.” He confronts the temple authorities and tells one parable after another that are clearly meant to condemn said authorities. The Pharisees are fed up, so they “went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said” (Mt 22.15). Only this time, they bring in reinforcements: the Herodians.

The Herodians were supporters of King Herod Antipas and staunch allies of Rome. Strange bedfellows, as the Pharisees were on the complete opposite end of the political spectrum, despising the Roman occupation. The two groups, Herodians and Pharisees, did not see eye-to-eye on much of anything. Except for one thing. Both groups despised Jesus and his condemnation of their respective positions—the Herodians’ collusion with the occupying forces and the Pharisees’ hypocrisy in religious matters. So, Jesus had managed to antagonize and alienate both church and state. What is it they say? The enemy of my enemy is my friend?

The two parties, newfound friends and allies in their quest to be rid of Jesus, come up with what seems to be the perfect way to trap him. They start off by buttering him up. “Teacher, we know 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” (Mt 22.16). Their praise is so syrupy sweet and deferential that it belies their true motives and intentions. “We think your teachings and pronouncements are crazy and dangerous, and not at all in keeping with any laws—God’s or Rome’s. You are just too big for your britches and need to be brought down a notch or two, and start showing deference and partiality to us, your superiors.” And they seek to do just that by asking a question that will be impossible for Jesus to answer. At least not without alienating one party or the other. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” (Mt 22.17b).

Taxation. An issue we can relate to as we approach our own elections. One that was no less contentious in Jesus’ day. Taxes were a basic part of the imperial system. It was not only the means of funding the vast imperial apparatus; it was also how they insured domination over the conquered people. Unlike our own time, where taxes are viewed as part of the social

contract, the price we pay for being citizens. But the people conquered by the Empire were not given citizenship status. As such, payment of taxes signified forced submission to Rome—both by the government who specifically designed the taxation policy to be oppressive, and by the locals who were forced to submit to the policy.

So, if Jesus answers that it is acceptable to pay taxes to the emperor, he would, in effect, be accepting Roman domination and oppression, and thereby alienate pretty much all of his followers—the common folk who were looking for a messiah to liberate them from Rome. Not only that; the tax had to be paid using the denarius, the coin of the Empire, as opposed to the shekel which was the local monetary unit. And the denarius was despised by devout Jews, as the denarius contained the image of Caesar, as well as the inscription “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus.”¹ Hence, the money would have been considered an idolatrous, graven image of one professing to be a god. From their perspective, the mere presence of the denarius is prohibited by the Ten Commandments.

But if Jesus answers that it is not acceptable to pay taxes, he will incur the wrath of the Herodians. They were in favor of taxation, because it was one way for them to get rich by skimming a little off for themselves before sending tax revenues on to Rome. Not only that, to assert that taxation was not acceptable would be a statement of subversion. As such, Jesus would likely be arrested by the Roman officials on charges of treason.

Given the choices, this was a no-win situation. Or so the Herodians and Pharisees thought. Recognizing what this unholy alliance was up to in their question, Jesus comes up with an ingenious response. “Show me the coin used for the tax” (Mt 22.19a). Someone in the group produces a denarius, the coin of the Empire. This was clever as it sent a subtle message that would not have been lost on those witnessing the events. In asking for the coin used for paying taxes, the denarius, Jesus makes clear that he himself does not have the offending, idolatrous coin. But in producing one, those opposing Jesus DO have the offending coin. This signals that by virtue of having the denarius in their possession, they are in effect supporting the Empire, regardless of their stated position. Actions speak louder than words.

Jesus then asks, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” to which they respond, “The emperor’s” (Mt 22.20-21a). And then comes the famous retort: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mt 22.21b). This was a very clever response, on multiple levels. On the most basic level, Jesus’ statement about giving the emperor the things that are the emperor’s technically covered and legitimized paying taxes to the emperor. Technically, the coins of the Empire were owned by, considered the property of, the emperor. So, paying taxes using the coin of the realm was merely returning to the emperor what was already his property, without being an a priori statement of support of Rome. Just as we are legally required to pay taxes to the government, but doing so carries no implied statement of support of governmental policies or actions. In a very subtle way, Jesus reframed the symbolism behind paying taxes to be a civic obligation (whether one likes it or not) and not a statement of support—support of a system of oppression; or support for a system that places the emperor, or the emperor who places himself, in place of God.

So that covers the issue of giving to the emperor the things that are the emperor's. But that's only half the answer. There is still the matter of giving to God the things that are God's. Just as so much of the opposition to paying taxes hinged upon the denarius and particularly what was symbolized by it carrying an idolatrous image of the emperor, so too does Jesus' understanding of giving to God what is God's hinge upon image. When Jesus says "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's," and his show-and-tell with the denarius, he is really saying "Give to the emperor the things that bear the emperor's image and give to God what bear's God's image."

What bears the image of God? In the broadest sense, all creation being created by God bears something of the image of God. Being created out of God's imagination. Being spoken into creation by God. Being given form by the breath of God. But there is one thing, above all else, that particularly bears the image of God. And that is us. Humankind. As it says in Genesis, "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen 1.27). As one commentary so eloquently notes, "Our whole lives should be 'given' to God in the sense of participating in God's mission, listening to God's law, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with the Giver of all good things."²

There is a temptation to see in Jesus's statement "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" a division between church and state. A division between secular and sacred. A division between worldly and religious. But that's not what he's doing at all. For Jesus, all of creation is ultimately subject to the will of God. Because even governments—even oppressive governments—are part of creation. They are creations of we who are made in the image of God and thereby co-creators with God. They are institutions that are comprised of human beings, who are, in turn, made in the image of God. Institutions that, ideally, are charged with caring for the wellbeing of God's people. Institutions that are ultimately subject to God. "Jesus isn't dividing the world up into 'financial' and 'spiritual,' or 'political' and 'religious.' He's pointing out that the 'spiritual' is a much, much bigger category, encompassing finance, politics, and virtually everything else: our bodies, our actions, our lives, and our life together in community with each other."³

Today's Gospel reading, and particularly Jesus' clever reply, carries far broader implications than the subject of taxation or responsibility to government authorities. It has far broader implications than perceptions about what is sacred and what is secular. Jesus' message is meant to cause the hearers to reflect more deeply on their own responsibility to God and to the state. But even more than that, Jesus' message is ultimately meant to be about stewardship. About how we approach our responsibilities for caring for the creation that has been entrusted to us—that which is beautiful and God-filled; and that which is not so beautiful, that is flawed, even ugly at times. That we have a responsibility for care for all of it. Responsibility for care for the world around us in all respects. Particularly, this time of year, that means responsibility for care for two things that seem so disparate: the state and the church. Specifically, our responsibility as citizens of the United States; and our responsibility as members of the Body of Christ, particularly the part of the Body of Christ that is St. Gregory's Parish.

As citizens, we demonstrate and exercise our stewardship by voting. By making conscious, prayerful decisions about those candidates and propositions that best reflect our Christian

values to love our neighbors as ourselves. For it is our decisions at the ballot box that help determine and shape the policies that will care for the needs and concerns of the people of our city, our state, and our nation in the coming years.

As members of St. Gregory's, we demonstrate and exercise our stewardship by pledging. By making conscious, prayerful decisions about how we will use our time, our talents, and our personal financial resources to support the mission and ministry of this parish in the coming year. How we will use our gifts, talents, and resources to care for our sisters and brothers, both within these walls and out in the community. How we will proclaim the Gospel message of God's love in word and action.

Giving to the state the things that belong to the state. Giving to God the things that belong to God. These are not mutually exclusive. They are really part of a greater whole. As followers of Christ, we are called to do both in ways that reflect our faith and our commitment to the One who is the source of all we have been given. But more importantly, to do so in ways that reflect the One whose image we bear.

¹ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/10/12/jesus-and-the-2020-election-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twentieth-week-after-pentecost>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.