

October 18, 2020
Render to Caesar...Render to God

Matthew 22:15-22: ¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said. ¹⁶So 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. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" ²¹They 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." ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

So there is nothing like watching a good chase seen in an action show, right? Where the person bent on getting away is maneuvered into a spot where there are just two choices – and both roads end up leading to a trap.

I feel like that was what the Jr. Pharisees and Herodians were trying to do to Jesus that day in the temple...back him into a corner, trap him into saying something that would enable them to be rid of him and toss him out for good. Note the actions: Jesus has been teaching parables that cast the Pharisees in a not so kind light, and after the last one last week, Jesus noted that tho they had been invited to the King's son's wedding banquet, they had refused the invitation and so were destined to miss the party. After they hear that they vow to find a way to trap him. The Pharisees get together and send their disciples to Jesus – the underlings, because of course the Pharisees themselves wouldn't stop to address Jesus. But they believe that have constructed a fool-proof trap.

They start with flattery. Oh, Jesus, we know you are sincere, yada yada yada...they go on. Then they drop the bomb: Is it lawful to pay takes to Caesar or not? Right there in the Temple, they ask Jesus to tell them what he thinks. Remember, they asked for it! They believe he is going to be sunk because they have put an impossible dilemma in front of Jesus. If he answers yes, it is lawful to pay taxes, then his own kin will be against him for siding with the enemy occupying forces. If he answers no, it is not lawful to pay takes, the Herodians will have ample material to charge him with sedition. It is, as they see it, a lose-lose proposition.

But again, they underestimate Jesus. Jesus answers the question with a question: Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? And though the words seem harsh, they really are justified, right? These folks have just unloaded a boat-load of flattery at Jesus' feet with the clear intention of having him think this is a friendly question, a worth debate between – well – friends. But Jesus knows better and calls them out: Hypocrites! Two faced persons...acting out a lie. Pretending to be something they were not – that is, humbled by Jesus and wanting his advice.

Rather than being caught on the horns of the Herodian slash Jr. Pharisee dilemma, Jesus asks for the coin that is used to pay the taxes. As it is produced, he asks them to examine it and please do

tell whose image and inscription is on the coin? It is Caesars, of course! “Render therefore to Caesars what is Caesars” The words echo on the Temple stones, reverberating for just a moment, before Jesus adds the clincher: AND TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GODS!

Now, for the Herodians, that second part would not have had the stinging force that it did for the Jr. Pharisees – and all other faithful Jews that were within hearing. The Jews would have been transported back to the book of Genesis and the creation story that proclaimed that God had created them, male and female, IN GOD’S OWN IMAGE! So if indeed Caesar was the rightful recipient of all that bore his image, GOD was the rightful recipient honor and reverence of those made and crafted in God’s own image.

Ok, so back to the chase scene image for a moment. The Herodians and the Jr. Pharisees each have their roads barricaded...and then it is like Jesus, in 007 style, pushes the button that hydro powers the car to sail up and over the barricades and land safely on the other side! It is genius! What Jesus’ detractors don’t realize is that he specializes in unlikely escapes....they do not yet know what will happen in that stone tomb in just a few days. Here Jesus performs a masterful maneuver that gives no one cause for anger, but simultaneously devalues Caesar’s currency and declares of ultimate value all those people the occupying forces had deemed worthless. The coin bears the image of Caesar and it has value only because it has value to Caesar. But those who bear the image of God – even those who have been beaten down and robbed of their dignity – well they possess an inherent value that can never be diminished. No matter what happens over the course of their lives, no matter what hardships they must bear, they will always retain the image. Long after any currency ceases to have value, God will still be God and they will still be God’s children.

I suspect that this is an important Word for us today, as we struggle with rising numbers again in this global pandemic and as we cringe at the when Jesus doesn’t seem to climb on board in our vilification of one another. Once again, Jesus avoids the traps of partisanship and call us beloved Children of God – all of us, each of us. And Jesus reminds us that we belong to the one whose image we bear, whether we are Pharisees, Herodians or the forgotten masses. We are imprinted with the image of the Almighty God, and to that One, and that One only, we owe our allegiance, our energy and our very selves.

At the conclusion of the baptismal services, after the waters have been poured and words spoken – and right before the cross is outlined on the one who is baptized forehead, there is a pronouncement made in unison by all the gathered congregation: **You belong to Christ in whom you are baptized! Alleluia!** I especially love to hear that bellowed out loud by everyone gathered – the confirmation that we who are born of water and the word in Baptism recognize to whom we belong,

I belong to Christ, in whom I am baptized. Alleluia! And so I invite you right now to claim that proclamation for yourself...to say the words with me: I belong to Christ, in whom I am baptized. Alleluia!

Alleluia! Amen!