

Whose Image Do We Bear? (Matthew 22:15-22)

A little boy had a quarter that his older brother wanted. "Okay," the older brother said, "let's flip for it. Heads I win; tails you lose." "Sure," the unsuspecting little brother agreed. And so, when the coin fell heads up, the older brother shouted, "Heads! I win!" Suddenly, though, it dawned on the little brother that he'd been in a no-win situation. Whichever way the coin had landed, it would have ended up in the big brother's pocket.

Similarly, in today's gospel lesson, the Jewish authorities thought that they had Jesus in a no-win situation. How carefully they'd schemed and planned to catch him by surprise. Jesus had criticized them for the way they were running the temple. Jesus had been undermining their prestige with his healing and all those parables he told. So the Pharisees had united with the Herodians against Jesus. The Herodians were the puppet rulers of the Romans. If Jesus continued to stir up the crowds, the Romans might remove them from power and seize complete control of Palestine.

The very fact that the Pharisees and Herodians came together showed how desperate both groups were to stop Jesus. For the Pharisees were the holy ones. Normally they wouldn't have had anything to do with the Herodians, who worked so closely with the "unclean," hated Romans.

But the Pharisees and the Herodians did come together in hopes of once and for all getting rid of the trouble making Jesus of Nazareth. And, indeed, they thought they had Jesus in a no-win situation. They said to Jesus, "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?"

According to the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, paying Roman taxes had been a major issue in Palestinian politics for years. There were three regular taxes: a ground tax, which was 1/10 of the grain and 1/5 of the oil and wine you produced. Then there was the income tax, which was one percent of your income. Finally, there was the poll or head tax, which had to be paid by every male age 14-65 and every female age 12-65. The poll or head tax was called the tribute coin, a tax you paid just out of tribute to Caesar. It's this poll or head tax that was lifted up to Jesus. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

The poll tax was levied by the Romans against the Jews in AD 6 when Judea became a Roman province. As soon as it was imposed, it provoked the rebellion of a Jew known as Judas the Galilean, who is mentioned in Acts 5:37. This Judas labeled as cowards those who paid their taxes to the Romans. Judas told the Jews that they needed to resist the Romans, for God was their only legitimate ruler.

The Herodians favored the tax, but the Pharisees resented it, and so, by coming together to ask Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" the Herodians and the Pharisees were sure they had Jesus in a no-win situation. However he answered, he would make one side angry. And worse than that. However Jesus answered, would give the Herodians and the Pharisees a way to get rid of him. If he said it wasn't lawful to pay taxes, he could be arrested as an enemy of the state. If he said it was lawful to pay taxes, he would make himself an even greater enemy of the Pharisees and others who agreed with Judas the Galilean that paying the tribute tax to Caesar was an insult to God.

Jesus didn't answer with a yes or a no. Instead he said, "Show me the coin used for the tax." They brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this (on the coin), and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then Jesus said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

How cleverly Jesus outsmarted his interrogators. And how cleverly persons have used his words over the centuries to support their own personal view of church and state. In Romans 13 Paul painted a positive picture of the role of government and commanded Christians to obey the government; but in Revelation 13, the author described the government as evil and warned believers to resist it unto death! In our time, some have said that Jesus was obviously saying that a Christian should support his government, right or wrong. Others, however, have said that Jesus was clearly saying that there should be a strict separation of church and state.

But it doesn't ring true that Jesus would say that we should support our government, right or wrong, because we have examples of Jesus himself speaking up against anyone and everyone who did wrong, who hurt another human being. Jesus always put persons above institutions and traditions. Furthermore, it doesn't ring true that Jesus would urge a strict separation of church and state, for he led an integrated a life. He was true to who he was in every aspect of his life: spiritual as well as political.

How then are we to understand Jesus' words today? What fits with the way he lived his life and what he said? Well, we have numerous statements from Jesus about money. Money wasn't that important to him. He himself doesn't seem to have owned anything other than the clothes he wore. Nor were institutions or traditions important to him. But what was important to Jesus was other human beings and God. As Rick Brand put it in a sermon entitled, "Caesar's Stuff," "Jesus lived and moved and worked out of an obedience to God that freed him from...petty forces. He did not do something just because it was good for the economy. He did not limit his actions just because there were some rules about not picking corn on Sunday. But he moved and lived and loved out of the deeper will and purpose of God." Lovingly ministering to others with compassion, forgiveness, justice, peace, and hope. And all the while, pointing to God the Father. Furthermore, we know that Jesus liked to talk in parables. Sometimes he used words to tell his stories, and at other times he pointed to objects as visual parables.

So, putting all this together...perhaps in asking to see the coin, Jesus was reminding his listeners that they shouldn't be so concerned about money—that money wasn't that important. It has Caesar's image on it. So big deal. Let Caesar have it. After all, it's only money. But we people are something else altogether. We're much more important than money, and we too have an image on us. We were created in God's image. And so, just as the coins with Caesar's image on them belong to him, so too we who bear God's image belong to him. "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

We are Americans, and regardless of which way we vote in two weeks, we love our country. But, Jesus' tells us, we are members of the kingdom of God before we are members of any kingdom of this world. As Christians, we must never let our patriotism obscure our primary loyalty. We may give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but we must never give to Caesar the things that are God's. We have God's image on us. We must give to God our very lives, for they are his. Yes, The Gospel Writer Luke got it right in Acts when he recorded Peter as saying, "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29).

For example, there was a woman in California who stood up for her Japanese American neighbors when they were interned in relocation camps during World War II. She didn't have a lot of power, but as a Christian, she spoke out against the injustice being done to her neighbors. And she bought her neighbors' homes

that were stolen by the government, so that she could return them to them when they were released from the camps after the war.

And in Argentina, there was a group of ordinary women who illegally protested when their loved ones were picked up by the government and then mysteriously disappeared. The protests of these women brought international attention to the slaughter and eventually brought an end to this evil government.

In closing, one more example of what it means to give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's but to give to God the things that are his. Years ago there was a wonderful movie entitled *A Man For All Seasons*. It was the story of Thomas More. More was the Chancellor of England from 1529-1532, the highest judicial official in England. He loved his king. He loved his country, and he loved its laws. Then a terrible dilemma developed for him. The king decided to end his allegiance to the Pope in Rome. More faced a conflict. He loved his country and his king, but he also loved his church and his God. Thus Thomas More was faced with two deeply personal loves, and yet, suddenly, he could no longer have both. He had to choose one.

When More decided that his primary loyalty was to God, he was arrested by the King Henry VIII and thrown into prison. One scene in the movie focuses on More's wife visiting him in the Tower of London. She asked her husband why he wouldn't just sign the statement of allegiance to the king--so they could get back to their lives of comfort and prestige. With anguish, More cried out that he wasn't made of the stuff of martyrs. He didn't want to die. But, in the end, More gave himself to God. He was convicted of treason for his refusal to acknowledge that the king was the supreme head of the Church of England. Before he was beheaded in 1535, Thomas More defended his actions by saying, "I am the king's servant, but God's first."

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Amen.

--Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; October 19, 2008