

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost  
Year A, RCL  
October 18, 2020  
North Fork Ministries  
Gospel:  
**Matthew 22:15-22**

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

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Teachers who instruct aspiring writers generally urge their students to show the reader what is going on in a scene, rather than just tell them. To describe the pinched lips and furrowed brow of an anxious character, conveys a much more vivid impression, than just simply remarking, "He was worried." More is conveyed through rich description and lively dialog, than through mere commentary.

Keeping that dictum in mind, notice how Matthew commented on today's gospel reading, and then actually told us what Jesus said. Matthew writes, "The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus." The question they actually asked Jesus, however, was this, "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?"

Matthew, writing with a particular agenda, then tells us that the Pharisee's words were said with "malice" or ill intent. But just for the sake of argument, let's imagine that the words of the Pharisees were sincere - that they weren't intended to entrap Jesus, but were actually a reflection of a real dilemma facing a religious people living under Roman domination.

Notice that accompanying the Pharisees on this encounter with Jesus, were the Herodians. As is often the case, politics makes strange bedfellows. The only thing that united the Pharisees and the Herodians was their common suspicion of this upstart from Galilee – Jesus.

The Herodians were followers of Herod Antipas, Herod the Great, the Jewish ruler that the Romans had placed in power to do their bidding. Herod and his

followers were the face of the empire. Their fellow Jews viewed the Herodian's willingness to serve their Roman masters as treachery.

I have a little more sympathy for the Pharisees than Matthew usually does. The Herodians had sold out, they were the lackeys, the collaborators with the Roman occupiers. The Pharisees, on the other hand were still asking questions. Questions that we as 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens of the American empire can relate to: How do we live in this world? A world so dominated by greed, the blind pursuit of power and wealth, the desire to get more stuff, that it is easy to miss the possibility that there might be another path.

Jesus replied to the Pharisee's question about paying taxes by requesting a denarius, and asking his questioners whose image and whose title was embossed on the coin's surface. Informed that it was emperor's, Jesus replied, "'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

We might take Jesus' answer as indicating, as people have in the U.S. since the creation of our constitution, support for separation of church and state. That seems a very good idea, but probably not an idea that ever crossed the minds of Jesus' listeners. Separation of church and state wasn't then an idea "whose time had come". Indeed the coin that Jesus requested to make his point was likely inscribed, not just with Caesar's face and name, but with the title, "Son of God." A clear division between religion and politics couldn't even be imagined in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

"In God we trust". That's an interesting statement to put on our money. What does it mean? "In God we trust our money?" "We trust God, instead of money?" Maybe it's a reminder that even the Federal Reserve can't be trusted to guarantee the value of our currency?" The meaning behind the slogan you've probably seen on cash registers in small town diners across America is more apparent: "In God we trust, all others pay cash."

The denarius that Jesus was given read: "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus." A testament, and a reminder to those spending the coins that authority lay with the Roman occupiers and that their leader possessed absolute, even divine, authority. To pay taxes was, for the Pharisees, to recognize the absolute authority of the Romans. And to even carry such a coin, was a violation of the second commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

We in the United States, are not occupied by the Roman army. The power of our elected government to affect our lives has constitutional limitations. Yet we grant power to all sorts of entities. To employers who demand too much of our time. To purveyors of time stealing entertainment. To Facebook, or Instagram or YouTube or whatever might be pilfering time from family, church, and restoration

of the soul. A pandemic might be a good occasion to take back control of your soul's well-being.

What is it that is stealing your soul? Who is the emperor in your life? There are many ways of putting your life back into balance. I like to remind you from time to time, that the Anglican tradition of which we are a part, has its roots in Benedictine spirituality. We have the Benedictines to thank for the daily office, the practice of morning prayer, noonday prayer, evening prayer and compline – the prayer at the close of day. But more than that, the Rule of Benedict, the guideline for living that Benedict of Nursia offered the monks that lived in the ancient monasteries throughout Europe, offered a life of balance. Benedict instructed his followers to spend a portion of each day in prayer, study, leisure, and work. He recognized that we are kept whole by a life in balance and that if we devote ourselves entirely to the pursuit of a singular task, we will become narrow, anxious, fearful people. Balance in life is restorative, healing, satisfying.

It may be necessary to give the emperor his due. But we don't have to give him our lives. We have to carve away something for our own well being.

Few of us are called to a monastic life. Not many are willing to give up ownership of all property and sacrifice family ties in order to pursue a life of prayer and contemplation. Most of us are called to something a great deal more complex. How do we integrate the life of faith into the kind of life we have chosen? It's interesting really, to imagine how you could do that. It isn't done just by showing up at church on an occasional Sunday, but by finding a way for your faith to permeate your existence – flavoring every thought, word and interaction you have.

I think we have pay attention to the wave of discontent that is steadily moving across the globe. A pandemic that seems to have no end in sight. Calls for justice in the face increasing economic and racial inequality. A sense that something is badly amiss throughout the land. A sense, perhaps, that the Emperor is getting more than his due.

Or maybe it's a movement toward a realization that, as the young boy in the fairytale, watching the royal procession move through his village, was bold enough to cry out, "The emperor has no clothes." There is a good chance that the entire system is broken. That the empire has left us with severe economic inequality, disease, and life-threatening climate change.

Jesus was telling his listeners that the images on the coins we carry cannot define us as a people of God. The dollar sign, the Stars and Stripes, the late Steve Job's apple, McDonald's arch, or the three-pointed star on the hood of a Mercedes. They would all like to define us, but they are pretenders to the throne.

We are created in the image of the Divine. God intends for us to be more than the mere consumers that the corporations behind the logos would have us remain.

In the rite of holy baptism, the sign of the cross is made on every baptismal candidate's forehead, marking the newly baptized as "sealed with the cross and marked as Christ's own forever." For we Christians, it is **this** mark whose essence will persist far beyond the time when the inscriptions and symbols of the empire have eroded away. The question we must continually and fervently ask ourselves is this. How does that indelible sign of the cross each of you wear on your forehead affect the way you live and the choices you make? What things are the emperors and what are God's? How does our faith shape our economic decisions -- our buying, saving, giving, and the rest?" Is the mark on your forehead truly a sign of who you have chosen to be?