

Ever, Only, All for Thee

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on October 18, 2020

Friendship Presbyterian Church

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him 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. (Matthew 22:15-22, NRSV)

Often in the gospels, we see Jesus confronted by his enemies as he is teaching, and they put him to the test, trying to entrap him. They are always foiled, of course, but they always seem eager to return, to try, try again.

And so, this time, the enemies come in the form of Pharisees and Herodians. As their name suggests, the Herodians were allied with Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and killer of John the Baptist, who had been installed as (puppet) king of the Jews by Rome. It was deeply in their interest to collect the taxes due to Caesar.

Diametrically opposite them were the Pharisees, who were committed to every detail of Jewish law, and so opposed paying the tax to Caesar for religious reasons which will be clear a little later.

The two parties have precious little in common (other than their mutual desire to see Jesus disappear), but on this *one* point, they profoundly agree. And so, they conspire together and come to him, butter him up with insincere praise, and then strike with what they frame as a *religious* question ... a question of interpreting *God's law* ... the very question the two groups debated with each other: "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

The reality of everyday life in their time and place was Roman occupation and oppression ... and with it, Roman *taxation*. And for reasons not hard to understand, the great majority of the Jewish people bitterly resented it. It was an oppressive burden on the backs of the masses who could barely pay it. But all oppression aside, the Romans felt very, very strongly about receiving their tribute, and had a certain severe way of dealing with those who didn't pay it or encouraged others not to pay it.

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” It’s a brilliant question. It puts Jesus in an impossible position. Either he *denies* that it’s lawful to pay the tax and runs the risk of arrest by Roman authorities, OR he says it *is* lawful and runs the risk of losing the hearts of his followers, most struggling to get by as it is ... and none being any stranger to Roman cruelty. This time, they are *sure* they have him.

And they *would* have, if their question had been posed to anyone else! Of course, Jesus sees through them and goes straight to the heart of the matter. “Show me the coin used for the tax,” he asks. And they quickly produce a silver denarius. Looking at it, Jesus asks a simple question, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” He certainly knew the answer already, but he asks so as to make his ultimate point all the clearer. “The Emperor’s” ... “Caesar’s,” they responded.

Now there’s a lot to this encounter that isn’t obvious to us, that *would* be to any first-century Jew. You see, the Roman’s taxation was more than just economic oppression, as bad as that was. It was also a slap in the face to the people’s *faith*. The Romans would *only* accept payment in *this* coinage ... coins which bore the graven image of the Emperor, which any observant Jew of the time would recognize as a violation of the 2nd commandment.

And from there, it only gets worse, for there’s also the *inscription* on the front side, the Latin translated as “Tiberius Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus”) ... and on the reverse side, another title, “Pontifex Maximus” (“Great Pontiff,” Caesar’s official, ceremonial role as High Priest of the Roman state religion). If the *image* of Caesar breaks the second commandment, the inscriptions violate the first (“You shall have no gods before me”). This is what so troubled the Pharisees about the tax, who would not even carry such coinage on their persons.

And so, it must be a Herodian who produces the denarius when Jesus asks to see one. And in producing one, the Herodians condemn themselves, showing themselves *perfectly happy* to use Caesar’s blasphemous coins ... coins which declare Caesar the son of a god. Their hypocrisy in even raising a religious question stinks to the highest heaven! And then, there are the Pharisees, who supposedly *do* care about the idolatry of the coins, not only colluding with idolaters, but doing so in order to bring down the one who truly *is* the Son of the living God!

Jesus sees their hypocrisy clearly. And so now, having established the image and title on the coin, Jesus answers them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

It was a brilliant question, but this is a still more brilliant answer. Jesus avoids the trap. He can’t exactly be accused of sedition by the Romans, as he *did* say “Give to the emperor what is the emperor’s,” but then neither can he be accused of compromising God’s commandments, unlike his questioners, who have already shown themselves willing to do just that.

The text tells us that his enemies were amazed by his answer and left him and went away. While applauding his clever answer, we today tend to be less amazed, because we’ve heard this

story for years as Jesus describing two parallel duties that can be discharged at the same time, so as to preserve our good standing as both *citizens* and *believers*. There is a place for everything, so the argument goes ... we have our duties to the State and our duties to God ... a secular realm and a religious realm, and respect must be paid to each.

The problem with this traditional understanding of the story is not so much that that's untrue, but simply that *that's not the point Jesus is making here*. Jesus is not laying out responsibilities to two separate, parallel realms of authority, but rather making a radical contrast between the two. While the first and second halves of Jesus' answer do parallel one another, they're not even *close* to being of equal significance, as if Caesar's claim was the equal of God's!

In Jewish theology, foreign rulers only had power over God's people by the permission of God, and therefore, tax may be paid to Caesar because he rules by this permission. But when God is done with Caesar, Caesar's power will be for nothing.

In fact, Caesar and God are so *un*-equal, we *might* be driven to ask what, if anything, *does* belong to Caesar? Some early Christian interpreters of this text looked to the image of Caesar on the coin, and therefore granted that at least *the coins* were his! So yes, send the coin back to Caesar ... in fact, send them *all* back! They've got his blasphemous image and title on them. They *clearly* belong to him, so let him have them. Caesar can stamp his picture and phony pedigree far and wide, but he cannot come near the true commerce which animates us.

One of the most profound truths of our faith is one of the simplest: that all human beings – *all* of us – are created in the image of God, and because we all bear God's image—we all *belong* to God. Just as the coin, bearing Caesar's image, belongs to Caesar, so we, bearing God's image, belong to God. Thus Tertullian, writing early in the third century, said, "Render to Caesar Caesar's image, which is on the coin, and to God God's image, which is on ourselves."

Or as the theological provocateur Stanley Hauerwas memorably put it, "So Caesar will get many or most of the coins—and be flattered by how well his likeness is rendered in the medium of cold, hard cash; but the coin of the realm of our flesh and blood is the image of God. What is rendered to God is whatever bears the divine image. Every life is marked with that inscription, an icon of the One who is its source and destination."

Although we may live under this or that Caesar and may have to plunk down this or that tax and carry out the duties of citizens, *we do not belong to Caesar*. We never have and we never will. We wholly belong, body and soul, to the living God ... Our ultimate allegiance is not to *any* country or flag or leader of this world, but to the Kingdom of God, and so we are to render to God what is God's.

Today we begin our Stewardship season in which we seek to live out this truth, in gratitude for all that God has done, all that God is doing, all that God *will* do in our midst. Over the next few weeks, we will prayerfully consider the part *we* are called to play in this work of God in the coming year. We will dedicate our pledges on All Saints Sunday, November 1.

Although 2020 has been unlike anything we could have imagined, we have seen the Spirit move in our midst and create new possibilities – even new models for ministry – that will long live on, even after COVID-19 is a thing of the past. In this way, the God to whom we belong is full of surprises!

Make no mistake: These last several months have been difficult, but we have been sustained by a Love which has always guided us and calls to us now. Answering that call is not something that "just happens" or is someone else's responsibility. It is, for all of us, a call to action and to commitment of our time, talent, and treasure.

Our theme for this season is "Ever, Only, All for Thee" – inspired by the final line of one of the great hymns of the Church, which we will sing at the end of this service. May it now and ever be the prayer of our hearts:

*Take my life, and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise ...*

*Take my love; my Lord, I pour
At Thy feet its treasure-store.
Take myself, and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee,
Ever, only, all for Thee.*

To the Glory of God. Amen.