

“Then shall all the trees of the wood
shout for joy at your coming, O Lord,
for you come to judge the earth.” AMEN!

Today, we overhear Jesus wrapping up
his conversation with the Pharisees.

Those temple authorities to whom
he'd given the three parables.

I know you remember them! :-)

We've covered each one in the past three Sundays.

He's still in Jerusalem; still in front of
the temple prefect; still teaching to people.

And while one parable spoke of
mind changing to follow God,

another about producing good fruit to give away,

and then the third,
to answer “yes” to come
to the wedding banquet, but also,
reorient your life to walk Jesus' way.

Today we read no parable.

Today is the teaching from Jesus to
be attentive to loyalties and commitments. (Pause)

You probably remember the old story about
a chicken and a pig who wanted to show
their gratitude for all the
farmer's care and protection.

The chicken decided that, given their limitations,
the best they could do was to provide
the farmer with a delicious
breakfast of eggs and ham.

So the chicken told the pig what she had decided.

The pig responded, "For you, a ham and
eggs breakfast is a gesture of great generosity,
but for me, it is an act of
total commitment!" (Pause)

Today Jesus teaches that commitment is nothing
less than completely giving oneself over to God.
(Pause)

So, we think and talk about where
our loyalties and commitments lay.

Where do they rest their heads at night?

A wise person once said,
“the best sleeping pill is a clear conscience.”

If we are committed to the wrong things,
the hurtful or greedy things, then we too
walk away from Jesus and
find ourselves alone. (Pause)

“They left Him and went away amazed.”

What a tragedy!

To be in the presence of Jesus’ wisdom and
love but still turn from Him and go away.

That is about as heartbreaking as life can get. (Pause)

We need to know that there was
another group with the Pharisees.

We are told today about the Herodians.

They were unlikely allies.

But we know how this happens sometimes.

Two groups or two individuals often unite
against a common enemy.

The Herodians were supporters of Rome,
comfortable they were with making
Rome great again.

They were Israelites who liked Rome being in charge.

Loyal and committed to Caesar and the empire.

The Pharisees, though, were very opposite
to the Herodians.

The Pharisees wanted separation from Rome
or any foreign leader or government.

They were committed to the strict following of
every rule and regulation in scripture.

Make the temple great again, you might say.

The Pharisees were loyal legalists.

The Herodians and the Pharisees did not
like each other but they found one thing
in common.

They found this Jesus to be
very dangerous to their values.

If he would just slip up, they thought,

if they could just get him to say the wrong thing,
then people will see he cannot
be everything to everyone and then
they'd nab him.

So they came up with a loaded question.

Oh, you know about loaded questions right?

These are the questions that are important
but that no matter what one answers
a debate will surely spring forth.

Loaded questions are those can get you in trouble.

Questions like: Stealing bread is wrong.
But is it ok to steal bread to feed a starving child?

The loaded question that was asked to Jesus was
"Is it lawful to pay taxes or not?"

The Pharisees likely saw Jesus to be
soft on opposition to Rome.

If he were to answer that paying taxes is lawful
there would be many, thousands of Jewish people,
upset with him for it would support the
occupying force.

He would surely lose followers,
but if he said “No, it is not lawful to pay taxes,”
then he’d be arrested for sedition.

The Pharisees couldn’t kill Jesus, but
the Roman authorities could.

He’d be labeled a dangerous revolutionary
that spoke in opposition to Caesar and executed.

All of this does not even get into the irony
that the Bible communicates to us
when the word tells us they came saying,

“Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and
teach the way of God according to truth,
and show deference to no one;
for you do not regard people
with partiality.”

They are so nice.

What a compliment! :-)

They speak of Jesus’ sincerity while
they plot and scheme to trick him
with loaded questions. (Pause)

So it is important to know that any answer
would have gotten Jesus in trouble and
we could have celebrated simply the fact
that he saw through what they were up to.

He saw their malice and said,
“You hypocrites, why are you
putting me to the test?”

But we need to make a decision here...

Was Jesus proving his wisdom by being sneaky
with the lesson of the coin and
not directly answering or

was he communicating a message approving
a divide between religion and politics
when it comes to money?

As in you can do what you like with your money
as long as you give some back to God?

Tell you the truth, I don't really like
either of those options.

Just like I don't feel right in saying that
since terrorists committed a heinous, vicious,

and selfish acts of killing innocent people

that gives a government permission
to indiscriminately launch missiles into
populations filled with innocent people.

Don't we all know that two wrongs don't make a right?

So we hold these two tensions simultaneously.

We hold the notion of Jesus being
wise in his answer and the notion about
what to use our money for.

While also seeing the way Jesus
recognized how people pretend.

You Herodians and Pharisees,
why are you pretending to be friends?

Why do you pretend to flatter me when
you seek to imprison me, or wish hurt
or bring death to me?

This would be enough for us to glorify Jesus
but he does more.

He goes into conversation with them
because he seeks to change their hearts;

their commitments and loyalties.

He wished to bring them to peace and
to a unity with God.

So, this leads us to our own question.

It is not a loaded question but an honest one.

What is our image of God?

It is something we may need to think about.

If Jesus were to tell us,

“Give to the President the things that are
the President’s and give to God the things
that are God’s,” how would we respond?

(Pause)

Maybe that is a loaded question! :-)

I tell you, following Jesus will get you
mixed up in the politics of the world.

But hear this!

Jesus’ point is clear and all of the Pharisees
and the followers of Jesus would know what
he was doing with his words.

Material things are of this world and
they will perish and turn to dust AND
everything we have comes from God.

Everything belongs to God.

What can we hold back from the Lord?

Jesus tells us, we can hold back nothing. (Pause)

Today, this morning, the image of God is so clear.

The image of God is Jesus.

Can you see His image today?

He invites us to see Him, His light, and His love.
In closing, I would like to share with you
a story I read from Pastor Phyllis Wolkehauer.

In her sermon “Invitations to Light” she told
how “everyone knew Mrs. Detweiler.

She was the special ed teacher at Murray Elementary.

She was loved because in her,
people saw the image of God.

She had the amazing ability to make everyone feel important and loved.

Even the children who were not in her special ed class considered it a privilege to be invited into her room.

On the walls of her small classroom were hundreds and hundreds of gold stars made out of construction paper.

Upon each star was the name of the student who had finished reading a book.

As soon as the book was completed a star was put up with the student's name and the book title underneath the student's name.

The more books read, the more stars, and she made each student feel like a star.

See, the image of God shined through her ability to make students feel special, unique and important.”

She loved her students and thus sought to make them feel special.

She loved her students and thus she was

the image of God to them.

She gave herself to her teaching and thus she was the image of God to them.

She valued the gifts each child brought and thus she was the image of God to them.

“But no one is perfect, sometimes she lost her temper and sometimes she let her children in the classroom down because she had her faults.”

Do you see, friends?

We may disappoint one another but the image of God never does.

Jesus never claimed perfection upon us as a requirement for his love.

We often think we have to be at a certain level before Jesus claims us.

Today, we see Jesus making a claim upon the Herodians and the Pharisees to hear his words, see the image of God in Him and let the barriers they've built fall.

Maybe they couldn't do it that day, but maybe,
just maybe, they were amazed enough
to come back to God later. (Pause)

Let us not wait.

AMEN!