

Show Me the Money
Cooke's-Portsmouth

October 22, 2017

Matthew 22:15-22

The gospel for this morning could be described as the revenge of the Pharisees. Jesus has been telling parable upon parable that describe their rejection and fall from grace and the elevation of those with whom they held great sustain. They wanted him stopped; silenced; humiliated. But they also realize how popular he was with the masses and they needed to find a way to expose Jesus as a mere man; no one special and fallible. At the same time, they realized just how scholarly in the scriptures Jesus was and how clever he was at avoiding entrapment. It was nothing new for Jesus; Pharisees had been testing him throughout his ministry. But now, after Jesus has entered Jerusalem to the acclamation of the crowds as King and Messiah, the stakes have been raised.

He's no longer just a local nuisance; he's a threat to the religious and political order. The Pharisees want to arrest Jesus, but are afraid of his popular support. So the disciples of the Pharisees and supporters of the Herodian dynasty try a new gambit; one that is sure to either undermine Jesus' popularity with the crowds or make it clear that he is a traitor to Rome. Either outcome will help them accomplish their goal of diminishing his support and threat to the status quo.

Ordinarily the Pharisees and the Herodians would not be allies. They both had different agendas and priorities but they were united in their disdain for Jesus and his power over the people. The Herodians were allied with Herod Antipas who had been named as King of the Jews by Rome. Not surprisingly, they supported paying the tax to Caesar. The Pharisees, who were committed to

the minutia of Jewish law, opposed paying tax to Caesar for religious reasons. Their opposition was based on the fact that the tax needed to be paid in a special coin bearing the image of Caesar, and a reference on the coin to his divinity. In their collusion and the desired end of deposing Jesus the Pharisees and the Herodians have selected their question and framed it carefully.

The Pharisees hoped that Jesus would support paying taxes to Caesar so that the people would view him as a Roman sympathizer whose taxation was a burden that oppressed and took food from their mouths. The Herodians hoped for the opposite; that Jesus would oppose the tax so that they could accuse him of sedition. No matter which way he answered it seemed that their trap was inescapable.

They go to where Jesus is teaching in the Temple and begin with flattery: "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. Jesus is well aware of their plot and its purpose, as well as their two faced and insincere flattery, and gains the upper hand.

Says, the carpenter from Galilee, "Show me the money used for the tax and answer me this: Whose image and inscription does the coin bear?" When they reply, "The emperor's," Jesus declares, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's ." At first it seems as if Jesus has agreed with those who collaborate with Rome, but in the next breath he adds what no truly religious person can object to: "and to God the things that are God's." That addition changes everything. It puts the emperor firmly in his place and proclaims God's reign over everything and everyone at the same time.

God's law allows what is imprinted with the emperor's image to be given back to him, but he also insists that it be done in the ultimately more important context of giving what is imprinted with God's image back to God. Jesus allows loyalty to Caesar as God's appointed representative but subordinates it to loyalty to God. Once again Jesus had beaten his critics at their own game and they went away both amazed and unfulfilled.

It is a great story reminding us again of the wit and wisdom of the son of God. Those who seek the demise of Jesus and wanting to diminish his power over his followers must go home defeated. But we also know that they do not disappear altogether. Like the tempter in the wilderness following his baptism they will simply retreat for another, more opportune time. But we are left with this story and need to make sense of it in our day and age.

Clearly it reminds us that we are expected to be good citizens of a country; paying our taxes and living within the laws of the land. But it also reminds us that we are also citizens of faith based community with allegiance to God. This narrative marries our civic responsibility and faith responsibility together as both /and, and not as either or. We cannot stop paying our taxes and remain upstanding citizens. And as faith based adherents and members we may just need to be faithful watchdogs of government; which skews the adage that we avoid all talk of religion and politics. It is one more challenging text that I would prefer not to have unravel with you this morning.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar is essentially a question of conscience. It is a question of how to react when allegiance to government conflicts with our allegiance to Christ. Jesus did not answer the question in a way that placed him at risk with either Pharisee or Herodian. He answered in a way that places the believer needing to balance responsibility as citizens of both an earthly and spiritual realm.

Is there a time to state one's opposition to wars, new tax schemes or issues of morality? Do we have concerns about the ongoing NAFTA Talks or do we simply adopt a wait and see attitude. Do we advocate pro -life or pro -choice? Would we have taken a stand on Residential Schools in the early 19th century when the Canadian government believed that the best way to solve the "Indian problem" was to remove children from their homes, live in boarding schools, many of which were church sponsored, learn English and adopt Christianity and Canadian customs as the new norm? Politicians deduced that native traditions would diminish, or be completely abolished in a few generations if the children were divested of their native heritage and culture. We have witnessed the ripple effect of the Residential School System as now adult children speak of the terrible cruelty that they endured as students. Puts the text in an uncomfortable light as we seek an application.

We cannot simply leave these gospel narratives in first century Jerusalem; we need to sit uncomfortably with them in our day and age; recognizing that we are dual citizens: citizens of the world and a country in particular and citizens of a spiritual realm. We are still called upon to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. How do we do that? Is it by putting an offering envelope on the plate? Is it by living an exemplary life?

Some scholars have suggested that money, position and net worth are all a part of the emperor's realm. Created in the image of God the best offering that we can proffer is to be our best selves; allowing the light of grace to radiate from within. Our nation and our city have been grief stricken with the news that Gord Downie of the Tragically Hip was diagnosed with an aggressive brain cancer and that he succumbed on Tuesday evening of this week. News of his passing has been peppered with stories of his passion for conservation, charity work and raising the profile of

abuse suffered in Residential Schools. I choose to believe that God is very pleased with the life Gord Downie lived, cut short though it was. It will not be given to all of us to leave such a vast and permanent legacy. Most of us will do our best to be faithful citizens of the world and faithful sons and daughters of God whose memory will fade in time. But this should not deter us from modeling the image in which we have been made in the triumphs and in the tragedies of life.

One of the things that our family has struggled with since Mike was downsized has been how best to be supportive. We did not want to be dismissive and Pollyanna like and suggest that this was for the best and that something better was just around the corner. Neither did we want to be pessimistic and suggest that given his age he should resign himself to unemployment. We hugged. We hoped. We wept in the face of unfairness and uncertainty. Created in the image of God with minds to think and reason we do not want the major decisions in life to be made for us by illness or economics. Our hearts go out to those employed by Sears as the company faces bankruptcy and liquidation.

As I pondered this text and the precariousness of employment I realized that my life partner has been downsized from every position he has had through no fault of his own. There has been no cake or speeches on his contribution to the life of a company and its labour force. This seems sad and unacceptable as he considers early retirement. So later today and on into the early evening we are having a New Beginning Party.

There will be cake and acknowledgement of his tenacity for each time he was felled he rose up again. He chose to model grace under fire and continued to be a seeker, a provider, a person of faith, hope and love. And should this be the end of the road he will seek out a new path and will

continue to render to both government and God his allegiance, hope and trust. Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's. Amen.