

**Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York**  
**Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York**  
**Marianne K. Tomecek, Interim Pastor**

*Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 24A – October 18, 2020*  
*Isaiah 45:1-7, Psalm 96:1-9, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, Matthew 22:15-22*

*Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN*

“A young lady was soaking up the sun's rays on a Florida beach when a little boy in his swimming trunks, carrying a towel, came up to her and asked her, "Do you believe in God?" She was surprised by the question but she replied, "Why, yes, I o." Then he asked her: "Do you go to church every Sunday?" Again, her answer was "Yes!" He then asked: "Do you read your Bible and pray everyday?" Again she said, "Yes!" By now her curiosity was very much aroused. The little lad sighed with relief and said, "Will you hold my quarter while I go in swimming?"  
 www.Sermons.com., Proper 24A, “What Is Caesar's and What Is God's?”

The little boy was direct and honest. The Pharisees’ disciples and the Herodians weren’t either direct or honest. They thought that they’d come up with a great question to ask this teaching fellow in the temple. If he said “Yes, it is lawful to pay the tax to Caesar,” he’d alienate the public, who had just shown how much they valued him as a leader when they welcomed him as a king entering Jerusalem on a donkey just days before. On the other hand, if he said that the tax wasn’t lawful, he’d be setting himself up for prosecution for sedition, for inciting rebellion against the Roman authorities. It almost sounds like the kind of question a reporter might ask a presidential candidate, doesn’t it?

A little background might be helpful here. First, the tax the people asked about, was one imposed by Rome upon every resident of the Empire. It was paid with a denarius, a coin that was valued as equivalent to the usual wages paid to a laborer for one day’s work. The Judeans resented the tax.

Although the Judeans didn’t have a situation like ours, with separation of “church and state,” they did consider their faith in YHWH to be distinct from the influence of the Roman oppressors. In fact, the setting up of money changers’ operations in the outer courtyard of the temple (the people who Jesus had attacked earlier that week, and thrown out of the temple) was for the purpose of exchanging the Roman coins that had images of Caesar on them for shekels, the Jewish coins that worshipers would use to make an offering inside the temple. This would allow worshipers to remain ritually pure.

The denarius (especially in the temple) was troublesome to Jews for two reasons: the graven image of Caesar’s head on the coin and the legend, “Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of divine Augustus.” So the Roman emperor was identified as god, and his image was on the coin, both in violation of the first and second commandments (Exodus 20:2-4).

Also, the people who had gathered to challenge Jesus and his authority this time were Pharisees' disciples and Herodians. The latter were a pro-Roman political group who supported the reign of the Herods, the family who the Romans had made "king" of the colony of Judea. Usually, the Pharisees (who wanted a return of Judean independence from Rome) and the Herodians were opposed to each other's positions. But in this case, they came together to try to set up Jesus, since both groups would have been happy to see him arrested, or at least be diminished in his influence with the public. ( Hare, Douglas R.A., *Matthew*, Westminster John Knox Press, [Louisville, 2009], p.253.)

So, Jesus' response to their question was ingenious. When he asked them to show him one of the coins that would be used to pay the tax to Rome, he showed them to be unfaithful to the purity laws – they had entered the temple with the idolatrous Roman coins on their persons. "The hypocrisy is obvious. They are happy to do business with Caesar's coins. Why then should they raise a religious question about giving Caesar his due?" (*Ibid*, p.254)

Jesus' response was, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" they replied, "The emperor's." He concluded, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matt 22:20-21.) The Pharisees' and Herodians' question challenged Jesus' social status, but his reply restored it: Matthew tells us that "When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away." (22:22.)

Without having designated exactly what the people should pay to Caesar, Jesus replied to the question in such a way that the people (the ones that he had been teaching in the temple all along) would be reassured. "In Jewish religious thought, foreign kings had power over Israel only by permission from God. Tax may be paid to Caesar because it is by God's will that Caesar rules. When God chooses to liberate his people, Caesar's power will avail him nothing." (*Ibid.*, Hare, p.254.)

This concept is presented in our first lesson today, as well. It relates back to about 540 BC, half a millennium before Jesus' teaching in the temple. The people of Judah (an earlier name for Judea) had been defeated in war by the Babylonians and had taken most of the Judahites to live in exile in Babylon. But then Cyrus, king of Persia, defeated the Babylonians in war and shortly after, allowed the former residents of Jerusalem to return to rebuild the razed city and the temple.

In the passage from Isaiah, "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus," (45:1). Recall that in Hebrew, "the anointed" is Messiah. So, God is using Cyrus as the king chosen for the sake of Jacob, and Israel, also described as "my chosen" and "my servant." (45:4) As with Caesar in Jesus' time, so with Cyrus when Jerusalem was rebuilt, the foreign (and not God-worshipping) king was empowered by God for the good of God's chosen people.

So what does Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees' disciples and Herodians help us to understand about our lives? We might say that, although there were to be no graven images of YHWH God, God's image has been on God's people, in living flesh and blood, instead of on coins, since man

and woman were created (Genesis 1:26.). And we might also say that, since Jesus was fully human, he also was made in God's image.

We live God's image in our daily lives. Like Jesus, we are confronted by challengers: people who seek to undermine us, or our faith in the Triune God. We receive from our government, but at times what we receive may not be free gifts – they may have strings attached, not always apparent at first. We may have to decide how far we will go along with a program or a campaign, if it seems to require us to depart from the tenets of our faith.

Does what God says to us (in scripture, in prayer, in dreams, in the words of other believers), ever leave us amazed and speechless, as the Pharisees' disciples and Herodians were after Jesus' reply to their question? Do our answers to people's questions about our faith ever leave them amazed and speechless?

God empowers us in faith and in the community of faith that is the church, to have hope to get through times that are difficult, as is this time of world pandemic, political and social upheaval, and personal losses. And God reminds us of the way to live the life of faith, first by having given us Jesus, the way, whose example we find in the Gospels, and whose Holy Spirit lives in and among us.

And we also have the examples of the lives of the apostles. As Paul said in his first letter to the Thessalonians, "you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake, And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired of the Holy Spirit." (1:5-6.)

So I ask you, my brothers and sisters, in spite of the fact that our lives are difficult, are we inspired to imitate Christ? And are we an inspiration to others to imitate Christ?

Let's pray. You have placed us in this world, Lord, to proclaim the Gospel; the good news that brings us hope. You have placed us in this world, to preach and teach and make disciples of all people. You have told us that it won't be easy, no, not a walk in the park. But you've also assured us – and shown us, time and time again – that you are with us, every step of the way. Even as we mourn the deaths of our beloved sisters in Christ over the last three months, we ask for strength and courage to take on the Pharisees and Herodians of our day, to overcome their traps so that we can continue to do your will in our every waking day, and to rest in your peace every night. In the precious name of Jesus, we pray. C: Amen