

Matthew 22: 15-22 2011

The Lord of All

Today Jesus finds himself in the crossfire of yet another conflict and controversy in the temple precincts. Matthew just tells us straight up that the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. And they have brought along some strange bedfellows---Pharisee's or even disciples of Pharisee's and Herodians didn't generally mix.

The Herodians were Jews who felt their best interest lay in making friends with the ruling Romans. * Look, they argued, the very temple we are standing in is being refurbished beautifully by Herod---why not pay taxes? So what if we accomplish with coins that have the emperor's image on them. Religion has nothing to do with it---cooperating with the Romans was a way to get ahead, what could it hurt? This is the tale they spun for themselves in their desire to align with power and it had trapped them.

The Pharisees on the other hand, are pretty popular for suggesting that as Jews they should not have to pay the Roman tax on every adult. Who wants to pay taxes, especially to an invading pagan nation?

And further, what a scandal to pay that tax with money that any deeply observant Jew would never touch---a coin with a graven image of Cesar which declared him a god.

The sharp edge of the Pharisee's viewpoint is that it is rife with legalism. Their tendency to want to paint everything as black or white, good or evil is as dangerous a trap as the Herodians choice to go along to get along.

When we set such a rigid standard for faith we need to be careful that our own behaviors rise to that same level of perfection, because if we stumble and say get caught with just such a coin in our pocket while we are in the temple---we might just get caught in our own trap and someone might call us a hypocrite.

As Jesus stands face to face going head to head with these uneasy allies it would appear he is in the proverbial "no-win" situation. If he says yes---it is lawful to pay the tax (meaning yes, the Torah allows for such a thing) then the crowd will be greatly disillusioned and possibly turn against him.

But if he says no---this tax is not lawful---then he is guilty of treason and subject to arrest by the Romans---this is in fact precisely what will happen to him in just a few days time, even though he quite skillfully escapes the trap laid for him on this day.

He does not directly answer their question but throws it back at his audience, who will have to decide for themselves where to split the difference between the emperor's claim on their wallets and God's claim on the totality of their lives.

He asks, "Whose head is this and whose title?" Or a better translation might read "Whose image is this and whose likeness?" When they answer Jesus' question saying that the image and likeness are, "Caesar's," Jesus replies that they are to give to Caesar what is Caesar's---or better yet, "Give Caesar back those things that are Caesar's. It is his coin any way---who cares if you give Caesar back his coin for the tax."

In my E Messenger piece this week I said that we often want to turn this rich teaching into a simple treatise for separation of Church and state---or worse yet, we set it up as a stewardship sermon. But both of these are very wide of the mark and rob us of a far more meaningful understanding.

People tend to live dangerously compartmentalized lives. We and maybe preachers especially are often deeply guilty of setting up a serious duality in speaking as though our lives with God and our lives in "the world" are in opposition.

And in this country we are particularly rabid about issues of the separation of Church and state. We are not sure exactly what that means, but we are confident that we know it when we see it.

We are fall prey to living one ethic in the workplace or in our lifestyle and compartmentalize God and faith into something we do on Sunday's for personal enrichment or.

I remember sitting on Diocesan Council in another Diocese with a wonderful man who was a retired naval officer. We were doing a Bible Study to start the meeting and his reflection was something to the effect that I know Jesus says we should pray for our enemies, but when we are at war, all bets are off. As I listened to his sincere and heartfelt comments I wondered where I was blind to the dualities of my own life with God and my life everywhere else.

I think Jesus reminds us today that as those who are made in the "image and likeness of God" that we can throw down the false walls of these compartments. These dividers which we erect serve only to fragment our lives and make us weary. Jesus invites and reminds us that totality of our lives, the world and all that is in it is ultimately under God's reign.

There is no doubt that there is good and evil in this world. But it is far more subtle than we imagine. It is never going to be as simple as lining faith up on one side and the world on the other; good people on one side and evil people on the other.

When we participate in this exercise we always end up just like these Pharisee's and Herodians caught in a dangerous trap of our own making. As those who are created in the image and likeness of God we are invited to draw our lines differently.

As one writer put it, we would far more likely reflect God's image if we lived our lives not in compartments or dualities, but in a circle. What if we understood our lives as a circle in which our lives come from God and are always moving towards God?

What if we understood time as a circle as well and that God is in fact with us at all times and in all places. In this circle of life, as those who bear God's image, what if we learned to discern, in any situation how we are honoring God in all things, living our faith, and practicing God's hope and compassion in the totality of our lives.

How can we honor and reflect that at our core we are made in God's image and likeness wherever we are; in our school, work, government, politics, at play, all of it! Can we cease categorizing the world in which we live and the people with whom we share it as good or bad, in or out, with us or against us?¹

Maybe the true key to wholeness is found by taking a moment to invite God into our lives in every situation. "Do we trust that God has the power and imagination to use any situation to work God's will for the world?"²

As Kim Beckmann puts it, "Can we set aside our snap judgments and our vague shame, our sense that faith is here and the world is over there and decide instead that God is in fact the center of our whole lives and sovereign over the whole world?"³

Can we fully live into the astounding truth that is no corner of our lives or in our world that God does not know or have the power to touch and transform? Can we once and for all give up the duality, compartmentalization, and judgment and live fully into the paradox that we are made in the image and likeness of "a God who can join even life and death, form light and create darkness."⁴

We are all coins minted and stamped with the image of a loving God and we are meant to be spent for the sake of hope, forgiveness, and reconciliation in all situations.

So in the end I believe that Jesus' masterful response is a reminder to all that everywhere and always we belong to God and those compartments we use to divide ourselves up into little pieces serve only to confuse and alienate us from God and from each other.

So the final answer to the question, "What are the things that are God's which we are to give back to God?" Well the answer is always and everywhere... our whole selves; our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies; whatever is pure as well as whatever is broken.

I pray that we may always render these things to God. And the God who loves us with an everlasting love will keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God in all things, all places and all people. God is Lord over all the earth and we are God's beloved creation. Amen.

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¹ Kim Beckmann, *Prepare a Road!: Preaching Vocation, Community Voice, Marketplace Vision* Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2002), 16-21. *Asterisk reflects my interaction with some of this authors work.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.