

23rd Sunday After Pentecost, 2008 (Proper 24A)

Gospel: Matthew 22:15-22

Old Testament: Isaiah 45:1-7

Epistle: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Title: Trapping Jesus

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It's never a good idea to try to trap Jesus. Many try. All fail.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday brings things to a head. The religious leaders want to arrest Jesus and they want to kill him. But He hasn't done or said anything they can get Him on. They need a gotcha moment. They need a smoking gun. They need Jesus to say something either blasphemous or treasonous so that they can get rid of him.

Three weeks ago it was the question, "By whose authority do you do these things?" They want Jesus to say that He has been sent by God. That would be blasphemy (unless, of course, it's true). But Jesus doesn't bite. First, Jesus asks about John the Baptist- where did his baptism come from?

And then Jesus tells three stories, the three stories we heard over the past three weeks: the two sons, the landlord and the deadbeat tenants, and the bum's banquet. Each of these stories show how Jesus is the Son sent from the father, the Pharisees reject Him just as they had rejected John and the other prophets, they will be judged because of their rejection, and the kingdom will be given to outsiders, namely you and me.

The first attempt to trap Jesus led to three stories. The second attempt to trap Jesus leads to a short saying, "Give Caesar's things to Caesar and God's things to God." Those asking the question are astonished and have to go away and regroup before the next attempt.

Let's take a closer look at the question and Jesus' response. First, the question: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? To us it may not seem that controversial. Everyone has to pay taxes, right?

Well, remember that the Romans are an occupying power. Most Jews don't want them around. Except, perhaps, for the Herodians. Herod the Great was a friend of the Romans. He was a supporter of Caesar Augustus, and the Roman Senate proclaimed him to be "King of the Jews." Many of Herod's sons ruled parts of Israel as well. They did so by permission of the Romans. They were puppets. They were collaborators. If anyone would be a supporter of the Romans, it would be the Herodians.

Now the Pharisees and their disciples were not such big fans of the Romans. To the Pharisees, the Romans were pagan infidels. Their mere presence polluted the Holy Land of Israel. While the Pharisees did not lead a rebellion against Rome, they weren't happy that they were around.

So you have these two groups- the Herodians and the Pharisees. The Herodians who loved the Romans and the Pharisees who hated the Romans. Certainly not friends or allies. But in this instance they cooperate to try to trap Jesus. Both groups would have felt threatened by Jesus. Both groups would be happy to see Him gotten rid of.

And so they come with flattery and ask Jesus, what appears to be a simple question. Is it right to pay taxes? Now the Herodians are looking for a "Yes" from Jesus. Yes, we should be good citizens and pay our taxes. The Romans provide us with security and the rule of law. They build our roads and our theaters, overall, they are good for our country and we should pay our taxes. And the Pharisees are looking for a "No" from Jesus. No, the Romans are godless heathens. This land was promised to Abraham and his descendants, and the Romans have no business here. They worship false gods, and they even worship the emperor as a God.

Whatever Jesus says, He's trapped. If He says Yes, then the Pharisees will brand Him a sympathizer and an idolator. If he says No, then the Herodians will brand him a traitor and a rebel.

What Jesus does, as Jesus often does, is answer the question with a question. Whose coin is this? Whose image and whose inscription? The answer is obvious: Caesar's.

The emperor at that time would have been Tiberius Caesar. The inscription probably would have read, "The August Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Caesar Augustus" and on the other side "Pontifex Maximus" or "High Priest of the Roman Empire." This would be like having our \$20 bill today with a picture of George Bush on it, along with the words, "The divine George Walker Bush, son of the divine George Herbert Walker Bush, God's representative on earth." Would you want to use currency like that? Every time you pulled one of those bills out of your wallet, I'm sure that you'd cringe, and maybe even swear under your breath a little bit. The image and the inscription, however blasphemous and controversial, on that denarius coin belonged to Caesar. The money was his, and so it was right to give it to him.

Now Jesus could have stopped there. He could have just said, "Give Caesar's things to Caesar." That would have answered the question. But He doesn't. Jesus continues by saying, "and give God's things to God." That's the key. That's the extra twist.

How do we know what things belong to Caesar?- they have his image and his inscription on them. How do we know what things belong to God?- they have his image and his inscription on them.

The image of God was first given to man at creation. We were made in God's image. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. In all other religions man makes gods in man's own image. They create gods who are like men only better- with certain special powers. Instead, we learn that God makes us in His image.

We lost that image, though, through our own sinfulness. The image was marred. Like a fine oil painting that's been horribly smeared, you can sort of see the original, but it's been ruined. And yet that is not the end of the story. Jesus Christ came to restore the image of God that man had lost. In Col 1:15 we read that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. As Jesus Himself says, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." Jesus Christ is the image of God. In Jesus we see the Father and His love for us.

In your baptism, the image of God was restored in you, as you were joined to the body of Christ. When the Father looks at you, He sees Jesus, His Son. It's as though God were looking in a mirror.

You not only bear the image of God, but His inscription as well. In Holy Baptism, the name of God was written on your forehead with the water and the words, "In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

You now bear the image and the inscription of God. You are God's. You belong to Him. Just as Jesus belongs to God as His Son, so you too, who have been baptized, now belong to God.

When Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's", you know what this means- pay your taxes, be a good citizen, and so forth. When Jesus says, "Give to God what is God's", then, what does He mean? Well, just look to Jesus Himself. He gave all that He had, even His very life to God. He urged others to do the same- to sell all that they had and give to the poor, to leave everything behind and follow Him.

You belong to God, and so everything about you belongs to him. You are not your own. You were bought with a price. Your body is now a living sacrifice. When the Lord tells us to give everything to Him, we usually soften the blow a little bit. Surely God can't mean everything. We should be ready to do so, of course, but he can't really expect me to, can he?

We need to broaden our view a little when it comes to giving to God. We certainly give to God by giving to the church. Regular, generous giving is part and parcel of the Christian life. But we also give to God when we are generous to our friends and neighbors. We give to God when we take care of our families and provide for them.

Everything that you have, everything that you are belongs to the Lord. He has made you in His image and put His inscription on you. You are the Lord's coin and He will put you to use as He sees fit. God used His Son to save the world from sin, and God will use you to life and joy and peace to those around you.