

Lectionary 29 A 2017, October 22, 2017, Matthew 22:15-24, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

If ever there was a passage of scripture that mixed together subjects most people don't like to talk about in public it's this one we just heard this morning as our gospel reading. Money, religion and politics are topics most of us avoid in polite, public company. It's too bad sex isn't a subject here and then we'd have all four. But for now we have just these three; politics, money and religion.

Money is Jesus' favorite subject. Who owns it, what's to be done with it, how the love of it can corrupt the heart and soul, form the heart of many of his parables. Quite often this teaching has both a political and social dimension to it. Money is held by a ruling class of people, while those with no money are forced into their lives of poverty with little or no escape. Jesus lived and taught in a highly charged political atmosphere. His homeland Israel was occupied by the brutal Roman empire. Some Jews, the Herodian party mentioned in today's gospel, supported the Roman occupation. Others, like the Zealots and many ordinary people, supported rebellion and revolution. Still others, like the Pharisees, tried to walk a difficult middle way. They held to highly rigorous religious purity that kept contact with the Gentile Romans to an absolute minimum. Still, they needed to engage in trade and commerce and so money was created to do so. This means money was often a political lightning rod.

That's a little of the background to the famous story we heard this morning. But there's a little more you need to know to fill out the controversy. Jesus makes the religious leaders nervous. Our story takes place the day after Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem. This is the day after what we know as Palm Sunday. It's Holy Week. Many thought Jesus was the Messiah, who would lead the revolt against the Romans. Jesus is teaching in the area of the Temple. The atmosphere around him crackles with excitement. Many see Jesus as a revolutionary leader. Those who are plotting and planning for rebellion may use this anticipation to their advantage. Others, like the Herodians, see Jesus as a threat to their cozy accommodations with their Roman overlords. The Pharisees believe Jesus, with his easy acceptance of the impure and unclean, like tax-collectors, prostitutes, the sick and lame, working and eating on the Sabbath, will erode their monopoly as authorities of the law. So the Pharisees, along with the Herodians, conspire with each other to get Jesus to implicate himself as a rebel and blasphemer; twin charges that will surely land him a death sentence.

They devise a trick question. It centers on paying a tax. But this question isn't about paying taxes in general. Jews in Jesus day, like us today, paid lots of different kinds of taxes. Sales taxes, property taxes, income taxes, as well as those hidden taxes on various products like gasoline and tobacco and liquor, except for them it was olive oil and wine. The tax they asked Jesus about was a particularly hated tax most people despised. It was called the Tribute Tax. It was the tax paid by Jews to the emperor to fund Roman occupation in Palestine. Each year every Jew was required to pay the Tribute Tax. For this tax they had to use a Roman coin called a denarius. The denarius was imprinted with an image of the Roman emperor Tiberius. Inscribed on the coin were the words, "Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus." The claim of divinity by the Roman emperors deeply offended the Jews, especially the Pharisees. They were forbidden to handle such objects, because they depicted human images as divine gods. Remember the commandment "You shall not make a graven image?" By asking Jesus the question about paying this tax the Herodians thought they could back Jesus into a corner. If he said, "yes, it's lawful to pay the Tribute Tax" he would lose the support of the people, because

they all hated the tax. But if said, “no, the Tribute Tax supports Roman oppression,” he would be branded as a rebel, and arrested.

Jesus knows their hypocrisy and shows it by asking to see the coin used for the tax. That such a coin could be produced on the temple grounds so quickly demonstrates their deception, because even carrying such a coin in the sacred temple was itself blasphemous. And then, in a masterful turning the tables Jesus asks, “Whose image is on the coin?” And they of course respond, “The emperor’s.” “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” In one brilliant sentence Jesus turns the tables on them, revealing their true motives, calling them to a higher account and revealing that everything belongs to the Holy One of Israel.

The point is this. Coins are stamped with the image of the emperor. But you and I are stamped with the image of God. Jesus has in mind Genesis, chapter one verse 26. “In the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.” The implication couldn’t be any clearer. Money may belong to the emperor, but we belong to God. The coin is stamped with the image of Caesar, but we are stamped with the image of God. The two competing claims, though held in a kind of parallel relationship are very much unequal. God’s claim on our lives is ever so much greater and more profound than the claim money has on us, or we on our money.

Jesus invites to take a look at our allegiances and how our money fits into those allegiances. There are times and places where we must give to the “emperor” meaning the government, what we owe. We live in a world where we pay our taxes in order to maintain certain goods and services we need and desire, like roads for travel, school for education, the common defense, and even help for the poor. But unlike in Jesus’ day, it’s a government in which we have a say. We can and should be engaged in the political process to change it or improve it or correct it when it has gone astray. But Jesus is calling us to something deeper and more profound. He invites us to examine how in each and every instance and decision we make what it means to say, “We belong to God.” If we begin everything we do with that understanding, “We belong to God and we are God’s beloved child,” what difference would it make on how we spend our money, the daily decisions we make as we go about our business and our routines.

Benjamin Franklin famously said, “In this world, nothing can be certain but death and taxes.” For disciples of Jesus this simply isn’t true. Jesus’ own death and resurrection seals our relationship as God’s beloved children. We are stamped with the image of God. But that image is the cross-shaped image of Jesus’ own resurrection and life. We belong to God. Everything else in our lives, including money, are simply the opportunities to give witness to the reality that already belongs to us. Amen.