

Abundance
Matthew 22:15-22
October 18, 2008

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying,

“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. It is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius.

Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.”

Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

This is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Jesus' pockets were empty.

Did you notice that? Jesus' pockets were empty.

The Pharisees and the Herodians tried to catch him in a trap – but it was Jesus who exposed the truth.

You see, Jesus faced the same tough decisions that we face. What is important to us? How do we demonstrate it? Where does our loyalty lie? What do we do when there is more than one group that competes for our loyalty?

The Pharisees thought they could catch Jesus. They were so eager to catch him that they aligned themselves with supporters of Herod – a group that was despised by the Pharisees because they sold-out their own people for the sake of the Roman Empire. The Pharisees were going all out – they wanted to expose Jesus for his radical teachings.

At issue was who claimed Jesus' allegiance. On the one hand were the Pharisees – those who were clearly on the side of God. On the other, the Herodians – those who were on the side of the Empire. The question was, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? If he answers yes, Jesus commits idolatry. If he answers no, he commits treason.

In recent weeks we have seen both of our presidential candidates do a good job of evading questions as they have debated on national television. Neither of them holds a candle to the political savvy of Jesus, however.

Jesus never answers the question directly, but his pockets were empty of any coin used to pay Caesar his tax – a clear indication of his perfect loyalty to the God who is above every god.

Jesus knew something else. He knew that the Pharisees pockets were not empty. Jesus asked for a coin that was used to pay Caesar his tax, and they reached in their robes and pulled out a denarius. On the face of the coin was an image of Caesar, the emperor. Inscribed on that coin were the words: "Tiberius Caesar, noble son of the God Augustus and himself Augustus."¹

¹ Boring, Eugene, The New Interpreter's Bible: Matthew (Abingdon Press, 2005) p. 47.

There the Pharisees stood – their hands clutching the evidence that they sought to use against Jesus. Here were the people who held tightly to their belief that God alone should be worshipped clutching money that described Caesar as God. Exposed as hypocrites, Jesus finally gives something of an answer. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor? Why don't you just pay to Caesar what is Caesars, and give to God what is God's.

Many people hear this passage from Matthew as Jesus' answer to the question about the separation of church and state. Following this line of thought, there is the world of Caesar – the secular world of politics and real life; and then there is the spiritual world – the world of the soul and of faith. This is not Jesus' point. We misinterpret what is at stake if we fall into that trap.

What Jesus does with his answer to the Pharisees is focus us on the bigger picture. What belongs to Caesar? These coins, the tax he is owed. What belongs to God? Well, everything – including Caesar and his tax.

Jesus' answer to the Pharisees isn't really an answer at all – but instead a call to loyalty. As the hearers of this story, we are left with the same questions as the ones posed to those Pharisees. What belongs to God? How do we live in a world of competing allegiances? Where do our priorities lie?

Jesus leaves it up to us to make those decisions – but his pockets are empty.

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It is a tradition in this church and in churches around the country to have a stewardship season in the fall. Stewardship season – that time when the leaders of the congregation ask for your money to support the programs, ministries, and mission of the church. Many of us look at stewardship season like bad medicine; you know you have to take it, but you sure hope the taste doesn't last too long.

It is indeed time for us to make pledges to the church. Today in your bulletin you see how this year's pledges have been used in our life and ministry together. What you have in your bulletin is an example of

how the session has been stewards of your gifts to God. Soon you will receive a brochure and a pledge card from Shelby Guilbert and me; a brochure that thanks you for your generosity, outlines some of the ways the session feels called by God to enhance and expand our mission and ministry, and asks you to respond to your faith in Jesus Christ by making a financial commitment to the church for 2009.

I realize that this Sunday is the first time I have had the chance to preach directly on stewardship in our time together, and from the outset want to be clear about three things.

First, I will never apologize for talking about stewardship with you or for asking you to give to the church. I think that God calls us to be stewards all year long, not only when it comes time for a church to raise a budget. Giving our money, time, energy, and imagination in the service to God and the church is what we are created to do. It is the essence of who we are and how we relate to the God who created us. Stewardship is a spiritual discipline and practice. As your pastor, my call is to help you develop that discipline even as I practice it myself.

Second, I will never use guilt as an emotion to motivate you to give. We give because we are grateful. We give because we need to give – not because we are coerced to give. You know how important the ministries of this congregation are. They form our witness to the Shreveport-Bossier community and to the world at large of what we hold to be important: that Jesus is Lord; that the worship of God is central; that we exist to serve; that loving our neighbors is at the heart of who we are as Christians; that using our brains to think about the critical issues of faith is important; that Christian community is sacred. You would not be here if you did not value the mission and ministry of our church – and your giving demonstrates how you value what we do. Stewardship isn't about guilt; it is a grateful response to what God has given.

Third, I will never challenge you to stretch your stewardship muscle unless I am willing to stretch it with you. Lindsey and I tithe, we give ten percent of what we earn to the church, and we will increase our tithe next year. I don't share that with you to get a pat on the back, but so that you know that I am serious in my conviction to practice

what I preach. The theologian Douglas John Hall said that “stewardship is everything you do after you say ‘I believe.’” I think he is exactly right.

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Some would say that now is the absolute worst time to be talking about stewardship. My mom and dad are about five or six years from retirement and the past few weeks have not been kind to their portfolios. The Dow Jones Industrial Index looks like a terrifically frightening roller coaster. If you have been reading the headlines it would seem that we are in apocalyptic times.

But I tend to think that now is the best time to talk about stewardship. Today’s passage from Matthew pushes us to consider how a disciple of Jesus Christ is to live in a world with competing loyalties; it pushes us to confront how to prioritize what is important in a world where things seem scarce. Well, here we are.

When asked by the Pharisees how we should act in a world competing allegiances, Jesus answers indirectly because he knows that a faithful Christian will always have demands on his or her life. Discipleship and the giving of our allegiance is never cut and dry – not in this world.

We are pulled between competing loyalties. We have mortgages, children to put through college, families to support, clothes to buy, insurance to pay, food to eat. There are unwritten and powerful expectations about what we will wear, where we will live, and what we will drive that each of us must negotiate. Each day, every one of us is fed information through advertisements about what we need to be the kind of people that someone else thinks we should be.

It is in such a world that God calls us to be disciples of Jesus Christ and stewards of the gifts that we have been given. Stewardship is about pledging your allegiance – and there are many people and places that would like to have it.

When the Pharisees pushed Jesus to instruct them on where our loyalties should lie, I kind of wish Jesus had been more direct. A

simple, clear, radical call to live in defiance of the rules and resist the world's authorities wouldn't be the easiest thing to live out, but maybe the easiest to understand.

In his wisdom, Jesus does not give a direct answer. But he doesn't leave us empty handed, either. Indeed, in his response to the Pharisees, he helps blaze a path for our discipleship journey.

When Jesus tells the Pharisees to produce the coin used to pay the tax to Caesar, the question he literally asks them is: whose image is on this coin? *Whose image?* As in Genesis 1:27, "so God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."² Caesar's image may be on the coin that is collected as tax, but God's image is on face of every single human being on the earth. "Whose image is on the coin?" Jesus asks. "It is Caesar's." "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar, and give to God what is God's."

Where Caesar engraves his face on coins and compels people to pay taxes to claim his authority, God creates the world and us in God's image and gives us the freedom to respond to God's grace.

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My friends, the economy of God is not bound to market volatility and the threat that there will not be enough. The economy of God is abundant – always being created and re-created in God's image.

What comes down to is this: The Pharisees asked about loyalty; about how much of ourselves we can pledge to those other things that lay claim on us, on our allegiances, on our resources.

And Jesus answered: you know.

You know what you have to do. Just make sure you remember where all of this comes from.

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In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

² With thanks to the Rev. Michael Kirby (Portable Snack paper, 2008).