

2023 10 22 – Caesar’s Coin

Scripture: Matthew 22:15-22 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

I just spent a week in Ontario with my siblings as we mourned our mother’s death and celebrated her long and productive life. We held her memorial service last Saturday in the little country church where we were raised in the Christian faith. It was a wonderful weekend of sharing memories, laughter and tears.

While I was in Ontario, we also started the process of dealing with our mother’s estate. My twin sister and I have been named co-executors and we spent Monday and Tuesday of this week in meetings with lawyers and representatives from the institutions where Mom’s financial assets are being held. Our mother had always been very quiet about her finances, so it seemed strange to be given all the details of her chequing accounts, mutual funds and GIC’s.

Most of us have been taught that there are things that are not talked about in polite company. Money, of course, is one of those things. What are some of the other things that we just don’t talk about? (politics, religion, sex, etc.) Exactly, and one of the biblical scholars that I read this week pointed out that today’s scripture reading contains three of those topics: money, politics and religion! He wrote, “Just add sex and you’d have people running out the doors!” So I guess we’ll leave the topic of sex for another Sunday.

<https://www.davidlose.net/2014/10/pentecost-19a-money-politics-and-religion/>

But we will take a deeper dive into today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Today’s story is a part of this gospel writer’s description of Holy Week. The

previous chapter begins with Palm Sunday, when Jesus enters the city on a donkey amidst the triumphant shouts of the crowd and then proceeds to the temple where he overturns the tables of the moneychangers. Today's story takes place on Monday, the very next day. Jesus has returned to the temple to teach about the kingdom of God using stories, the stories we call parables.

The Jewish leaders, or Pharisees, are worried about the large following of disciples that have formed around this upstart preacher. They are so worried that they are willing to go to their own enemies, to the sympathizers or supporters of the local Roman ruler, Herod, to figure out a way to trap Jesus. Together, these unlikely conspirators, come up with the following question, "Is it lawful to pay tax to the Roman emperor, or not?"

Now you have to understand that the tax they are referring to is one of many taxes, but this particular tax is paid to Rome to support the Roman occupation of Israel. That's right: first-century Jews were required to pay their oppressors a denarius (or the equivalent of a days' wage) each year to support their own oppression. If Jesus supported the payment of this tax, then his Jewish followers would question his loyalty and if he denounced the tax, then he could get himself in trouble with the Roman officials. It was a well-laid trap.

Of course, this is where the issues of money, politics and religion come to the fore in this story. We are faced with similar questions every day. We also pay taxes. We also struggle with many of ways that our taxes are used to support activities or projects that we may not agree with. Some of us have loyalties to

both political and religious organizations. Some of us, like Jesus, even choose to make our feelings on these topics known in public.

Jesus recognized the trap that had been laid and asked to see the coin that was used to pay the tax. When he had the Roman denarius in his hand, Jesus asked “Whose head is this, and whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. And Jesus said to them, “Then give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, but give to God what is God’s.” The scripture tells us that when the Pharisees and the supporters of Herod heard this, “they were astonished and went away.”

Jesus’ words, at first, may not seem so “astonishing” to us. But those first century Jews knew exactly what Jesus was saying. They were very familiar with their Hebrew scriptures and, no doubt, the creation story from Genesis immediately came to their minds. In chapter one, verse 26, God says, “Let us make humankind in our image, to be like us.” That Roman coin may have been made with the image or likeness of Caesar, but humankind is made in God’s image, in the likeness of God.” Caesar’s coin might belong to the Roman emperor, but the Jewish people knew that they belonged to God. Their loyalties, their devotion, their very being was God’s alone.

We, in the 21st century, are also God’s children, made in the image of God. Our allegiance, our loyalty also belongs to God. Our worth comes, not from which political party we belong to, which religious denomination we are a part of, how big a house we live in or how much money we will leave in our will, but rather by

the fact that we are, each one of us, a beloved child of God. Our worth, our value is defined by God's love. In God's eyes we are enough just as we are.

“Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but give to God what is God's.” So what does it mean to give ourselves to God? Jesus came to this earth to answer this very question. When we give ourselves to God then we become a part of the creation of God's kingdom on earth. And, as a part of that kingdom, we are called to love God above all else and to love our neighbour as ourselves. And we do that, not as an obligation, but rather because it is who we are and who we are made to be. When we know that we are enough just as we are, when we know that we are loved, then we can't help but love others.

Yes, we live in the real world and there are taxes to be paid. Yes, we live in a capitalist society and there are wages to be earned and dollars to be saved. Yes, we live in a democratic country and there are political parties to support. Yes, we live in a pluralistic world and there are many religions to be considered. But the core of all that we do, the money we spend, the causes we join, the faith we choose is based on the knowledge that we are beloved children of God and that we are called to love.

Caesar's coin had his image on it. When I checked my wallet yesterday, I realized that the coins in my possession have the images of Queen Elizabeth, Abraham Lincoln and George Washington. I wonder how our thinking and our actions might change if our coins, our bills and even our credit and debit cards had the image of Jesus on them? Or possibly the image of the cross or the fish?

Instead of being constantly reminded of who is politically powerful, we would be reminded of the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being. Instead of being constantly reminded of who receives our taxes, we would be reminded of who encourages us to share with love. Instead of being reminded of the power of the dollar in our lives, we would be reminded of the power of love.

I invite you now to find one of the markers have been left in the pews this morning and to take that marker and put the cross, or the fish on one of your credit or debit cards, the one you use most often. If you don't have a card with you then write it on a paper bill or even on a coin.

And may this symbol be a daily reminder of your deep connection to the God of Love, and your calling to live that love in the world.

May it be so. Amen.