

Tough Questions?

Matthew 22:15-22

This morning's Gospel lesson from Matthew, chapter 22, describes a time when Jesus is embroiled in conflict with the Pharisees - the religious leaders of his day who invested a great amount of energy into defining the letter of the law, while neglecting the weightier matters of justice, compassion, peaceful living, loving relationships, and faithfulness (Matt 23:23). They saw their primary task as guarding and preserving the law. While the faith they demonstrated often appeared dull and lifeless, it was anything but fresh and freeing. The Pharisees were unwilling to take the risk of living compassionately. Their faith had little to do with imagining and envisioning a life of wholeness, well-being, and peace. These Pharisees would have little understanding of what Francis of Assisi had in mind when he said, "It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching."

Jesus' walking surely was his preaching, and it was this truthfulness of faith that the religious leaders found so threatening. Through his words and the very manner of his living, Jesus invited the people of his day to experience a markedly new way of living in the world. A way of living based not upon greed but upon compassionate sharing; a way of living based not upon violence and vengeance but upon healing, forgiveness, and peace; a way of living based not upon fear and anxiety but upon hope and trust.

It was as if Jesus was urging us to embrace an alternative story as the foundation of our lives, as the bedrock of our lives. A story based upon relationship with a God who relates to mankind not with an iron fist of judgment, but with a love that knows no limits. A God who relates to us not with an angry and vengeful spirit, but with a passionate yearning that all humanity live life in the light of good news - that we are all God's beloved children. It is God's yearning that this alternative perspective towards life would guide us into new levels of faith and trust and hope, into new heights of gratitude, compassion, and joy.

Not surprisingly, the Pharisees find Jesus' message to be threatening. While they want a faith they could package and control, Jesus continuously reached out to and included all manner of people, whom the Pharisees would much prefer to be held at arm's distance, well beyond the reach of God's love – like those dogs the Samaritans. While the Pharisees seek to define their God rigidly, Jesus continually invites his hearers to experience a God of abundant generosity and grace, a God focused on tearing down walls of suspicion and misunderstanding, a God who would literally stop at nothing to communicate a deep and abiding love for the people of God's creation.

Jesus wants the Pharisees' experience of God to be turned upside down and inside out. Is it any wonder, then, by the time Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem during Holy Week, that the religious leaders have begun to plot ways to rid themselves of this One who again and again challenges and confronts their narrow perspective?

In this morning's scripture reading, the Pharisees are intent upon trapping Jesus in an impossible situation and decide to confront him with a political question. So, they surprisingly collaborate with the Herodians, a group they normally hold in contempt. These Herodians were members of King Herod's party willingly made peace with the hated Roman rulers - profiting nicely from their relationship. The Pharisees, on the other hand, seethe under Roman rule, convinced that God alone is the rightful ruler of Israel. But the Pharisees' disdain for Jesus is stronger than their contempt for the Herodians, and so together members of these two oppositional groups come to Jesus, asking a question that they hope will force his hand. "Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right – is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

Clearly in this passage we hear the Pharisees speaking and quite interesting they open the dialogue by flattering statements to Jesus (v16). The phrases they use to describe Jesus are correct; he does indeed expound God's will correctly, and does not allow popular opinion to shape his speeches. But while the Pharisees attempt to flatter Jesus,

they by no means revere Jesus. They are operating out of malice and evil intent and Jesus notices it at once (v18).

However, the question they raise is indeed significant: Is it lawful to pay taxes to a foreign ruler? – Wow, that is a tough question! Is it in keeping with the Torah and our heritage?

It was not the amount that aroused the antagonism to the tax, the amount was not that significant, rather it was the principle of being subjected to Rome. Adding to the resentment was the fact that the coin used to pay the tax was stamped with the likeness of Tiberius Caesar, along with an inscription honoring him as the sacred son of the divine emperor Augustus using the words “son of god” and “high priest”. While the Pharisees found the tax distasteful, they reluctantly supported paying it.

In responding, Jesus again makes a clever countermove. First, he forces the questioners to reveal their own commitments. He asks to see the coin used to pay the tax, and - guess what – they have the emperor’s coin in their possession. Second, he states his answer in such a way avoiding a simple yes-or-no answer. In doing so, he escapes the trap of either (1) endorsing Rome’s sovereignty and alienating the people, or (2) rejecting Rome’s sovereignty and inviting arrest as an insurrectionist.

“Whose portrait is this, and whose inscription?” Jesus asks. “Caesar’s,” answer the leaders. Then Jesus asserts, “Give (or pay) to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

In the centuries since then, many Christians have taken these words out of context, using them to announce that we are to give whatever Caesar or the current nation state demands...But, elsewhere in the New Testament, Jesus makes it quite clear that the opposite is true; our ultimate loyalty, our number one loyalty always belongs to God.

So, “Give (or pay) to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” can be paraphrased this way, “Insofar as we live and participate in the civic order, in the world,

there are civic obligations to fulfill. However our ultimate obligation, which sets boundaries and limits to all other obligations, is faithfulness to God, the ruler of all creation.”

So, the most common approach to Jesus statement has been to assume that he is neatly dividing life into spiritual matters on the one hand and civic or worldly matters on the other. This understanding is that Jesus is telling us to obey God in the spiritual realm and obey human rulers in the political realm. Like other citizens, then, God’s people always pay their taxes, always support the established order, and (in most Christian traditions) agree to fight their nation’s wars.

The problem with this interpretation is that it effectively denies the sovereignty of God over every realm of life, political and spiritual. It is more likely that the intent of Jesus’ statement is to invite us to decide political questions such as paying taxes in the context of our fundamental commitment to “seek first the kingdom of God” (Matt 6:33). Where the policies of the state contribute to greater peace and justice, thus reflecting God’s own agenda, God’s own yearning – then supporting the state is right and proper. Where policies of the state, however, protect the powerful, destroy the weak, and threaten life itself, must we not in fact selectively say no to the state in order to say yes to God? To paraphrase Ecclesiastes 3: “There is a time for civil obedience, and there is a time for civil disobedience”. Also, Peter and other apostles are quoted in Acts 5:29, “We must obey God rather than man”. Blessed are you; holy are you; your kingdom is the kingdom of God! Amen.

From the words of Paul to the Corinthians, “Therefore, my dear brethren, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give of yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”