

Sermon for Oct 22, IPLC; MIC student Ole Schenk

Sermon title: By whose image, and whose inscription? Gospel lesson: Matthew 22:15-22

“Is it right to pay the tax to Caesar, yes or no?” This is the question that puts Jesus to the test in our Gospel reading. A very tricky question. A “gotcha” question. There is no safe answer.

If Jesus says ‘yes’ -- thumbs up to tax --- he is saying ‘yes’ to government, and not the government of the Judaean people, but the government of *them*, the Romans, and their conquering, domineering legions. The government of *him*, Caesar: The tyrant who stamps his face on all the coins, whose flags fly on the gates of the city, who even has the audacity to claim himself as god. So if Jesus says “yes,” to paying tax, he’s affirming the enemy of his people.

On the hand, if Jesus say says *no*, if he says refuse to acknowledge Caesar, refuse to pay his tax, he will inflame the anger others who benefit from getting along with Caesar, who are happy with the how things are going, people like Herod, who are waiting for a chance to arrest Jesus.

It is a trap. It is not a genuine question open to an answer. Whichever way Jesus answers, the crowd waiting for his answer is ready to take hold of him by his words, by one *sentence*, one *isolated* moment. Tell us the answer, and then we’ve got you.

The question may be a trap, but behind the question is something real. Paying tax is a heavy lift: the *extraction* of one’s livelihood. And that is certainly not limited to Jesus’ own time. After walking down to H&R block last spring, a little close to the April deadline, my first time paying US tax, I walked away thinking have I just handed myself over to? Where will that portion of my livelihood go?

Then comes the *humiliation* of watching how the Caesars of any time spend what we’ve handed over to them: what is done with the money, sometimes disastrously; what is not done, what cries out to be done. For all the public good that makes paying taxes our civic duty and legal responsibility, it remains a tangled issue for us all.

And so the faces of the people look to Jesus to give an answer to this situation in which we are *all* caught, “is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

For all of us, we face encounters where there is no easy answer, where we feel deeply conflicted in our response. No matter what we do or say, wherever we take our stand, our answer will never be right, it will somehow get twisted around. Yet up we go and go in to that room that we’re dreading, we take up the phone and answer that call, sign off on those papers. There is a temptation, to become tired, to become weary or cynical, to feel resigned. In the face of decisions where there are no simple or right answers, there is a corrosive resignation that wears away the dignity of our humanity.

So what does Jesus do? Let’s imagine we are there with him. Show me a coin, he says, let’s take hold of this. So let’s take hold of what’s entrapped us. Look at this coin. Whose image and

whose inscription is on it? All the focus of everyone here is brought to Caesar, all the weight of the humiliation of what it means to constantly see that image and to bear up under the inscriptions of his name and his words over the fabric of all of our lives. And Jesus says Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, it's his name that's on the coin...

...and then in that crux of the moment, Jesus keep going, and makes this masterful, majestic, lordly, pivot, over to what is different and holy, and life-giving: because the other half of the sentence is.... give to God what is God's.

Because If a coin has the image of the one to whom it belongs stamped on it, what about a human person, whose image do *you* bear? This is what we learn in the first chapters of the Bible in Genesis, that God has made humankind in God's image. God, in the words of the Psalmist, has "made you fearfully and wonderfully" in that very divine image that no Caesar can wear down or scratch away.

And whose inscription of belonging has marked your lives? who in the words of Isaiah, has "inscribed your name on the palms of God's hand?" And even when you forget, who bears you up, as a mother who cannot forget the baby who nursed at her breast.

And, who as we have seen today in baptism of Haley and Emma, that inscription is the cross of Christ forever, who clothes and wraps you in a promise of the Holy Spirit that endures and goes with you through all the struggles of life, through death into life. Is it God in whose care we truly belong and this whole world belongs.

And so, sheltered in this mighty word of Jesus, Caesar's image as every present as he may, grows dim, as an electric lightbulb in room is forgotten in the glory of broad daylight and we who are gathered at Jesus' word, remember we are made in the image of God.

It says that the Judaean leaders and Pharisees went away "amazed." "Amazed" as when Jesus performed a healing, as when Jesus drove out demons.

Amazed, as when someone is ready to trap you in your words, and, in the moment of temptation, you are not isolated, dragged down, reduced to a reaction, but you *hold to the one who holds you up*, with your dignity intact, ready to act and speak, to remember your baptism, that belong to God, and not the way of Caesar.

That is what it means to give God what is God's. To give God what is God's is exactly as Jesus shows us today, in the moment of temptation where we want to *react* to the Caesar's in our life, and to be trapped there in reaction, Jesus word comes to us, to free us to remember we are made to *create*. To change the terrain, to, walk in God's freedom, to give of ourselves and to imagine.

We still pay our taxes, because we share the responsibility of what it means to be a citizen in this world, and we do so in a place where the candle of hope stays lit in our hearts and our hands and voices are ready to speak and intervene for the betterment of the world, toward its healing, toward its redemption.