

“Of God and Emperor”

Matthew 22: 15 – 22

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Rev. Dalene Vasbinder

‘So, tell us, Jesus, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?’ A seemingly simple question.

Jesus responds, “Give unto the emperor what is the emperor’s and give unto God what is God’s or, as many of us have heard ‘Give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” A seemingly simple answer.

But we know, don’t we, that so often what seems simple in scriptures is not. Jesus, why don’t you just answer the simple question with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’? That would be nice for once. His answer is far from ‘yes’ or ‘no’ simplicity. So, we, yearning for simple, clear cut answers tend to fit his answer into our yearnings. ‘Give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s’. We tend to hear the text as an affirmation of support to nation and to God, that there is the secular world of government/nation/law on the one hand and religion/God on the other hand and somehow these two spheres are separate and equal and we give each their due. Caesar here, God here, we give the allegiance to Caesar that’s due; pay your taxes, obey the laws, stand for the anthem and the flag and we give the allegiance to God that is due; go to church, read your Bible, say your prayers.

Ah but there’s more. There’s always the ‘more’. Just as today’s taking a knee isn’t about patriotism or the flag, this short scripture isn’t really about paying taxes. Just as it’s easier to keep today’s conversation around the flag, it’s easier to keep this scripture’s conversation around paying taxes.

But God never calls us to easy, distracted, superficial answers or solutions but rather, just the opposite. We’re called to deep waters. Remember that other story? The disciples had been fishing all night and caught nothing. As the anthem goes:

*“They’re fishing nets were empty when they first saw the Lord.
All night they had been fishing in the waters by the shore.
The Lord said ‘go to deep waters’, cast your nets once more.
And because they obeyed, they will never be the same.
Go out to deep water, deep water, our nets of faith will overflow.”*

And we know the story really isn't about fishing or water but having the will and courage to look at deeper meaning, to deepen in faith and understanding of God through Jesus.

So as we plunge into the depths of this text, my mind goes back to an image from the third Star Wars movie, in the original trilogy, 'The Return of the Jedi'. The rebel forces have captured what they think are the coordinates to allow their ships to destroy the dreaded 'Death Star'. A fleet of aircraft are sent out to do just that. But suddenly, Admiral Acbar sees it for what it is and yells out, 'It's a trap!'

We the listeners hear those same words at the beginning of the scripture, 'It's a trap!' A seemingly simple question prefaced by all of this sticky sweet language, 'Oh, Jesus, we know you are so wise and show no partiality, so help us with this question we have.'

If we had been following the lectionary for the last few weeks and reading the Matthew text, we would have some background. But because we haven't, let me provide that for you now. In Matthew, Jesus has entered Jerusalem, gone into the temple and turned over the tables of money changers, (not a popular move) then begins to teach in parables. His authority is challenged by the religious leaders. He answers them in parables as well and their frustrations increase. So, two groups that normally don't walk in the same circles, do not support each other politically, these two groups the Herodians and the Pharisees, have joined forces to try to silence the rabble rouser named Jesus.

Remember, Jesus (and the gospel writer Matthew) was preaching to a people who were living under the oppression of a foreign power. Their land was occupied by the Roman Empire. We don't know much about the first group, the Herodians. According to scholar Douglas Hare in his commentary on Matthew, from their name, "we can pretty much guess that they were a secular political party that support the right of Herod the Great's successors to rule Palestine". (Interpretation, Matthew, p. 253) In other words, they cozied up to the Emperor by supporting the Emperor's local guys. They were pro-Roman since no one could rule any area of that world without Rome's approval. The Pharisees, on the other hand, weren't gung ho supporters of the Roman occupation but kind of kept quiet about things, accepted it as a necessary evil as long as Rome left them alone and didn't interfere with their religious practices. Jesus was speaking to the crowds, giving hope and therefore power to even the least among them, which posed a danger to the group that supported Rome outright (the Herodians) and the group

that supported Rome by just keeping quiet (the Pharisees). As one quote goes, “If you are quiet in the presence of oppression, you are a part of the problem”.

Both of these groups come together to try to trap Jesus. ‘It’s a trap’ because either answer creates a ‘darned if you do, darned if you don’t’ response. If Jesus answers, ‘yes, by all means, you are to pay taxes’ then he would get booed by the Jewish people who he’s been teaching lately, for they were not fans of the Roman occupation. And they were not fond of this tax; for they were to pay what was the equivalent of a day’s worth of wages to the Roman occupation. But if Jesus were to answer ‘no, you should not pay taxes to Caesar’, he could be accused of anti-Roman activity and be hauled off to jail.

Just like the question is not an easy yes or no question, the answer that Jesus gives is not easy either. In fact, one could say that he traps them in their own web.

‘Do you have a coin? Whose image is on the coin?’ They quickly pull out a coin and show it to him, answering ‘Caesar’. That’s when the trap closes in for it was not only not a popular thing among the people to have Roman coins but under religious law, one was not supposed to have anything with ‘graven images’ stamped on them, especially in the temple. One can almost see the reaction of the Pharisees as they readily hold out the coin for all to see but quickly realize, as gazes around them turn stern with condemnation, that ‘oops’, they fell for Jesus’ trap.

‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s’. Give to Caesar’s that which has his likeness, his image stamped on it.’ And the people around him start to shake their heads in disapproval. What? Are you caving in Jesus? Are you saying to support the emperor, the occupation? But the disillusionment only goes so far because it’s followed with ‘and give unto God what’s God’s’.

And what is God’s image stamped upon? Most likely most of those standing in the temple were aware of the teachings in Genesis; ‘let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’. Yes, give unto Caesar a coin with his picture stamped on it but give unto God what has God’s image stamped on it; your life. Again, quoting Matthew commentator Douglas Hare, “The second half practically annuls the first by preempting it.” It is God’s power that rules, not the emperor’s, Yahweh over Caesar, not one’s way equal to another but God’s way always.

And that’s where it gets tricky and oftentimes not easy and many times uncomfortable.

What does it mean to give God our life? Give to God what is God's, we know that everything under the sun and the moon is created and belongs to God, including 'us', we who have the image, the likeness of God stamped on our being.

Let's let that sink in for just a moment. We were made in the image and likeness of God, and because we bear God's likeness, a reasonable conclusion would be that we are to act like God. Not mind you, like *gods*, those who lord their authority over others for self-gain, but rather like *God* – the One who creates and sustains and nurtures and redeems and saves...no matter what the cost. We are called, that is, "to serve as God's agents, God's partners, and God's co-workers." (David Lose, blog, Partners in Preaching)

'Deep waters'.

Give unto God what is God's, as in ourselves, as in trying the best we are able to follow the Way that Jesus points out for us; how better able to live out the image of God stamped on each of us than to follow Jesus as an example? That 'way' includes a life of compassion and empathy, sitting at table with all kinds of folks, speaking truth to power when need be, offering hope and healing and inclusion to all and especially to the marginalized.

Jesus does not fall for the trap. Instead, he traps the others with the truth of God's sovereignty, that we belong to God and that God is constantly trying to call us back into that realization, back into that truth, that what rules the world is love and light. May we allow that to rule our lives as well. Even when it's not easy.

Amen