

Message for March 7, 2021
Lent 3 - Walking Through Holy Week
The Teachings: Risking Challenge
Matthew 22.15-22

“Never discuss politics or religion in polite company; it will only cause ill-will and indigestion. Should an unpleasant discourse threaten the peace, smile serenely and quickly change the subject.” (Miss Abigail Jenkins’ 1875 rule of Holiday Etiquette)

What are the two things that we are never supposed to discuss in polite company?

Politics and religion?

Ok, well we’re going to talk about both.

And just for good measure, let’s talk about money too.

If anyone ever says to you, that politics don’t belong in church. Feel free to point them to me. Or, to this passage. Because if taxation isn’t a political subject, I don’t know what is.

Here we have the religious folk and the political folk approaching Jesus with a question. The religious folk are the Pharisees. An interesting and tricky group to define. No one went around calling themselves “Pharisees.” The name came from the Hebrew and Aramaic words parush or parushi, which mean "one who is separated."¹ This label likely being applied to folks who lived apart, lived according to the traditions of the Fathers, the oral history passed down from Moses and those who followed him. The Pharisees were knowledgeable about Jewish law and tradition. They would have scrutinized Jesus carefully.²

Like the Pharisees, the Herodians wanted political independence for the Jewish people. While the Pharisees wanted to restore the glory of the kingdom of David, the Herodians

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pharisees>

² <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jesus/Scribes-and-Pharisees>

supported the kingship of Herod the Great.³ Two rival factions - religious and political. At least until Jesus shows up in town.

Then they put aside their differences to question Jesus. Except that it is less of a question and more of a trap.

“Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”

They start with flattery. Except that what they say is all true. Jesus was a person of integrity - honest and teaching God’s way with sincerity. And he didn’t favour the rich and powerful over anyone else. His ministry, his attention, his care was for all people regardless of position or social standing. All of this is why the crowds were gathering, the people following Jesus (why we follow) hoping to learn from him.

Maybe they were acting suspicious. Maybe he caught a bit of sarcasm in their tone. In any case, Jesus knows what they are up to. He recognizes their bad faith, their malicious intent. The question is a tricky one.

Is it lawful to pay the imperial tax to Rome? This tax is a result of being an occupied people. It is a tax that is imposed only on subject peoples, not on Roman citizens. It’s certainly not a *just* tax. But if Jesus says that, he will be in big trouble with the Roman authorities. On the other hand, if he says that it is lawful to pay it, he will no longer have the crowd on his side. Pay the tax = be hated. Don’t pay the tax = be condemned. It’s a no win for Jesus. Or so it would seem.

So he asks to see such a coin that is used to pay this tax. This would be a denarius, which has the likeness of Caesar on it, as well as the inscription “Tiberius Caesar, Augustus,

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herodians#cite_note-2

son of divine Augustus". Essentially, this coin is idolatry. It has the image of someone proclaimed to be a god, but not the God that they/we proclaim as Holy. This is really interesting for two reasons. One, noted by Amy-Jill Levine in her book *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, Jesus doesn't seem to ever be carrying or handling money of any sort. In fact, when he is asked to pay the Temple tax earlier in Matthew, he has Peter pay it for him. Jesus gives in kind - healing, exorcising, teaching - rather than in coin. Second, those who ultimately did pull the coin out of their pockets were being low key shamed here. To possess such an idolatrous object is incriminating, and if it is the Herodians that had it, they are immediately set at odds to the Pharisees.

So, first Jesus sets his opponents against each other, rather than him. Then, he cleverly answers the question and sidesteps the trap laid for him.

In the words that many of us recognize: *Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.*

This isn't about the taxes I mean, it is, and it isn't.

The money is important. Money is always important. Professor Allie Utley points out that coins are powerful symbols. They represent a literal value in society. The faces and inscriptions represent what holds power and influence. If you look at our money, you'll see a lot of Canadian values represented. Symbols of Canadian identity - a maple leaf, a beaver. Other Northern wildlife - the caribou, loon and polar bear. The bills on my wall depict Peacekeeping forces and war memorial as well as an excerpt from "In Flanders Fields". The five has, in peak Canadiana, a hockey scene. We have our own representations of Empire - former Prime Ministers, the Queen. More recently consider the kerfuffle when Viola Desmond replaced Sir John A. MacDonald on the ten dollar bill.

Money is and always has been a complicated matter, a complicated material. What does it stand for? What does it do? And to whom does it belong? Jesus invites us to step into the story and ponder all these things. Jesus also asks that we consider these things as

they relate to God. And finally, Jesus invites us to consider the things that might belong to God.

What is it that has the imprint of the divine upon it? What carries the likeness of God? If we go allll the way back to the beginning we will hear: *Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness... (Gen.1.26)* Likeness – ikon – is the word used in both Genesis and Matthew. So, Jesus is hinting at this when he asks, "Whose likeness is this, and what title?" Not only does he silence the critics, he challenges the rest of us to hear God's initial pronouncement and promise: We bear God's likeness and are therefore made to be more than we sometimes realize.⁴

We are stamped with the words of the divine. We have inherent value. The question becomes, where do we spend our value, ourselves? How do we share who we are in the service of the Divine? It's a tough question and a tall order. To fulfil it, let us look to the One who walked among us. Who came in human likeness. Who lived with integrity. Who was honest and followed God's way sincerely. Who didn't play favourites, who did not succumb to allure of power and status. The one who gave of himself, spent his time and energy, attention and care with those who needed it, needed him - folks who were vulnerable, oppressed, needed to be reminded of their own value. May we go and do likewise. Rather than being polite company, let us be holy company. Unafraid to enter into matters of politics and religion, and what really matters. May we be so bold.

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/10/pentecost-20-a-image-likeness-and-identity/>