

Lectionary 29/Proper 24A – October 17, 2011

When the Pharisees and the Herodians ask Jesus whether or not it is lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor they are not really all that interested in what he thinks. They want him to think they are interested in what he has to say but they are not interested in the least. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?” It’s a trick question. A question meant to put him to the test. They want to trap Jesus so as to discredit him because Jesus not only baffles the Pharisees and the Herodians. He makes them nervous.

So, here is the trap. If Jesus answers yes or no to the question he will have been duped into taking the side of either the pro-Herod people or the Pharisees. Saying “yes” would please the Herodians because they were supportive of the Roman government. The Pharisees, earnest interpreters of God’s law, would like a no response because paying taxes to the Emperor defied allegiance to God. So, either way, Jesus would be in a corner. But, he doesn’t answer with a yes or a no. He avoids their trap and brilliantly puts the question back to them by saying “Give to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor and give to God what belongs to God.” He knew what they were up to and successfully dodged the trap. Matthew tells that they were *amazed* at his response.

How does Jesus’ answer set with you? Are you amazed at his response? Or, does Jesus’ answer evoke within you another kind of feeling or thought or question or maybe even some confusion? I must confess to you that I am not amazed. Each time I encounter this Scripture passage, I’m not amazed. I’m flummoxed. It makes me scratch my head because I’m slightly confused or it makes begin to wonder about things that don’t seem entirely clear to me.

My first response is “Wait a minute, Jesus. I thought that everything belonged to God?” How could some things belong to the Emperor and other things to God? But, then Jesus also has a way of stretching our imaginations and making us think, so then I am led to ponder what it is truly all about.

Some have used this text as the foundation for an entire theology or worldview that places the Christian in a kind of double loyalty: part of us belongs to God and another part to the government. That is tidy and neat, but what happens when public servants or public policy clashes with the values of God’s kingdom? Can we be so duplicit?

Some make the suggestion that Jesus’ was response was tongue-in-cheek at the very least, if not downright sarcastic. A case of biblical humor. Could be.

The most intriguing interpretation I’ve heard is this: by saying give to the Emperor the things that belongs to the Emperor, Jesus is essentially saying take those coins and give them back to where they belong. Since they bear the image of Caesar, not the image of God, you should not have them. They are idols. Give them back. This reading has some merit, but problems, too.

Well, at the very least, Jesus’ response evokes for us a struggle or questions about what it means to follow Jesus in lives of commitment while living in a real and complex world. Maybe the gift in Jesus’ response is that we are given opportunity to ponder, think, reflect and do the necessary work of sorting out what it means to live as Christians.

It begs necessary questions: What is our relationship to the government? What is our relationship to the community in which we live, the world at large, the schools we attend, the places where we work, the families to which we are related, the friends we have, or the neighbors on our block? How do we balance all of those things? What belongs to God? What belongs to the government or the school or the Rotary club or the soccer league or the PTA and so on? How do we balance all roles and responsibilities? Does it sometimes feel like a juggling act?

I admire jugglers ... keeping all those balls in the air. And I must confess to you that I'm a crummy juggler. I can't even clap my hand in rhythm let alone keep several balls up in the air at the same time! Yet, in a very real sense I feel like I sometimes juggle. I suspect the same is true for many of you. Balancing our roles and arenas for living can be a bit of a juggling act at times. So, I'm sometimes wondering how best to maintain my role as husband, pastor, son, brother, uncle, friend, neighbor, citizen and so on. Where can I strike a balance between work, rest, leisure, prayer, family, friendships?

It especially gets tricky when one of those areas in life seems to demand a lot of time or energy or attention – when one ball feels heavier than another. Maybe the Empire is claiming too much on your life. Maybe your job is sucking the life out of you. Maybe loyalty to a friend crowds out paying needed attention to others. Maybe participating in the baseball or soccer team or a club, as wonderful as these things are have dangerously become ends in themselves. With all of these scenarios and much more, I wonder if that isn't where the problem lies.

Luther, in his commentary on the First Commandment in the *Large Catechism* wrote, "That to which your heart cling, that I say is your god ... many think they have God and everything in abundance when they have money and possessions; and they trust in them and boast of them with such firmness and assurance as to care for no one. That person has a god on to which he sets his heart. It is called mammon, the most common idol on earth." And it isn't mammon only. Luther goes on: "Whoever trusts and boasts that they have great skill, prudence, power, favor, friendship, and honor, also has a god ... that to which your heart clings, that I say is your god." When anything or anyone becomes all consuming and demands everything – money, people, work, even church - we may be entertaining idols and then the juggling act becomes especially onerous.

So, how do we balance? Do we juggle more earnestly? How do we fit being Christian into the mix? Well, I suspect that's the wrong question. The more appropriate question is: *How does all of our living fit into being a Christian?*

For you see, all of life belongs to God. All of it – being a parent, friend, spouse, citizen, team player, neighbor, church participant, member of the community and more. Our jobs, our homes, possessions, even leisure time belongs to God. When we see that being a Christian is a 24/7 adventure, then life isn't really a juggling act. In fact, we can let go and not worry about keeping all the balls up in the air. Instead, we can let go and approach all avenues of our living as ways to serve and give glory to God.

So, for example, our attitude toward money is fashioned around how we use money. We know that it can be that very thing to which our heart clings. It can be an idol. As Timothy reminds us, in itself money is neutral. It is the love of money that leads to all kinds of evil. We live in every area of life as followers of Jesus who talked extensively about the dangers of loving

money. We are free to use money in every aspect of our living as a tool to further God's purposes and to carry on God's work. Recognizing that it isn't ours in the first place and that it belongs to God, we are called to give it away to the needy neighbor, to family and friends to the ministry of the church, to other ministries and to keep some for good vacations and rest. We discern how we manage what really belongs to God. It's a matter of trust.

On this Generosity Sunday you will be given an opportunity to complete estimate of giving cards for the coming year. You are being asked to grow at least one step. I emphasize that word "grow," because the practice of tithing or taking a step toward tithing *is a way we grow*. Tithing, that is giving 10% of income to the church, is a spiritual practice I highly recommend. And it is precisely that: a spiritual practice, just as prayer and worship are spiritual practices. They are ways we grow because they are tangible ways we take part in the mission and work of God. Practices like this shape us over time and we discover that our lives do not belong to us and instead of being boastful as Luther put it about what we presume to own or possess, we become generous, grateful, and giving. I want to bear testimony to you today that tithing is something I truly enjoy and it is one of the ways I worship God and am committed to following Jesus. It is a concrete way for me to place trust in God instead of placing trust in money.

I am inspired by the example of my friend Norm and his late wife, Joanne. Norm is keeping up, I'm sure, what he and Joanne practiced for years. They reached a point in their life where they gave away more than half of their income. Besides 10% to the congregation to which they belonged, they gave to several more to other churches, ministries, charities and venues for justice; while using money to live and take care of themselves. I've been inspired by their story and once asked him how they grew in that sense of giving, how they got to that point and what accounted for their generosity. Norm, thought for a moment and then said, very simply, "God is good." He went on to explain that God has given us everything, especially in the love and forgiveness poured out on us in Jesus Christ. Their giving, he quite simply explained, was a response to God's generosity. Enough said.

When the protagonists asked Jesus their trick question, he asked them to see one of the coins and pointed out that the image on the coin was none other than Caesar. The image on our coins, the image on billboards, and the images with which we are inundated may become the very things to which our hearts cling, but we've been given a very different image. It is not the image of a ruler or a star or a hero. It is rather, the image of the suffering servant who poured out his life for all. The Cross isn't something we place in our pockets, nor does it glare through neon lights but it is the very image of God that has been traced on our bodies in Baptism. In freedom we may cling to Christ and Christ alone, in every aspect of our living, recognizing that all is of God and from God. God is good. Amen.