

**Pentecost +23 - Year A**  
**19 October 2008**  
**Saint Anne's Episcopal Church**  
**Lee's Summit, Missouri**

**Matthew 22:15-22**

*Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love.*  
**AMEN.**

A common threat can produce strange and unlikely collaborations. And, the collaboration we have heard about in today's gospel reading is a strange and unlikely one indeed. Only a common threat could have brought the Pharisees and the Herodians together.

You see the Herodians were a priestly group in Jerusalem, a group which based much of its power on its alliance with the Roman Empire and its support of Herod Antipas, the Roman appointed puppet governor of Palestine. For the Herodians, compromising with the Roman occupiers was a pragmatic day-to-day reality.

And, the Pharisees were a lay group within Judaism, a group which was intent on obeying the Mosaic law. For the Pharisees, compromising with the pagan Romans would have been theologically unthinkable. The Herodians and the Pharisees - they couldn't have been more different. It's hard to imagine that they agreed on much of anything. And, even harder to imagine that they ever worked together.

But, a common threat can produce strange and unlikely collaborations. And, the Herodians and the Pharisees found themselves truly facing a common threat in the person of Jesus.

You see it had been only a few days before that Jesus arrived in Jerusalem. Entering the city in an absurd parody of the Roman conquerors. Seated on a donkey as a sign of humility. Yet, greeted by signs of worship and adoration from the crowds.

And, since Jesus had been in the city, he had created all kinds of chaos. Physically pitching those who conducted business in the Temple out of the stalls where they sold doves to be used for sacrifices and overturning the tables where they exchanged Roman coins for coins that could be used to pay the Temple tax. Telling stories which were really thinly veiled indictments of the Temple leaders. Getting the crowds which had come to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration all stirred up.

Jesus was a threat to the civil order and a threat to the religious order. A threat to everything that the Herodians and the Pharisees valued and gave them their power. A threat that could not be ignored. A threat was just too dangerous.

But, an outright attack on Jesus would never work and those who viewed him as a threat knew it. An outright attack would never work, because the crowds which greeted him when he entered the city thought he was a prophet.

No, they couldn't risk a public uprising which would bring the full force of the powerful and ruthless Roman army down on the city to restore the imperial peace and security and destroy all the Herodians and Pharisees valued in the process.

They were going to have to be clever, very clever. They were going to have to set Jesus up, to trap him into saying something that would turn the crowds against him and show him be a hypocrite. They were going to have to work together in this one. A common threat can produce strange and unlikely collaborations.

So, these unlikely collaborators found Jesus teaching in the Temple and went about setting their trap for him.

**Teacher, we know you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality.**

(It never hurts to start a good set-up with a little flattery, you know. And, now the big question...)

**Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?**

Well, Jesus, there's no way you can get out of this one. It's one of those damned if you do, damned if you don't deals.

If you say, "no, it's not lawful to pay taxes to the emperor," then you're going to be seen as a political agitator and have the Roman government all over you.

And, if you say, "yes, it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor," well, then, you will turn those peasant crowds who love you – those who labor under a heavy burden of taxes and who see the imperial tax as nothing but a final hated act of forced submission to an occupying government – those peasants who love you so much, they will surely turn against you.

So, go ahead, Jesus. Answer our question. Now, we've got you right where we want you – you're either an anti-imperial political revolutionary who's a threat to the Roman Empire or you're a pathetic weakling who talks big about the kingdom of an all-powerful God but who submits to the earthly power of the Gentile Roman pigs. Either way, Jesus, you lose, and we win.

**Show me the coin used for the tax.**

**Show me the coin used for the tax.**

I can almost hear the disgust and impatience in Jesus' voice, can't you?

One of those who had asked the question stuck his hand into his pocketbook, pulled out a denarius, and handed it to Jesus. A denarius – it was about a day’s wage for a laborer. And, it was a coin minted by the hated Roman government.

Imprinted on it was the image of Caesar Tiberius. The inscription stamped on the coin was – Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus and high priest.

To a Jew, there was no other word for this coin than blasphemous.

And, suddenly, the gotcha question that the Herodians and the Pharisees had asked of Jesus was turned right around on them. They had come to Jesus out of malice and spite, trying to make him out to be a hypocrite. But, now the tables were suddenly turned, and they were shown to be the real hypocrites. In reality, Jesus wouldn’t have had to say a single word.

You see, Jesus didn’t have one of these Roman coins in his pocketbook. No, it was the Herodians and the Pharisees who had the coin with the emperor’s image and that blasphemous inscription in their pocketbooks. They had even carried that coin into the Temple with them. They were the ones who had bought into this pagan system, even though they professed to follow the one true God of Israel. And, Jesus and everyone else there that day knew it. The evidence of their hypocrisy was that coin right there in their hands.

It’s as if Jesus were saying – as one writer has put it –

“Everybody has to decide between Caesar and God. No one can serve two masters. You seem to have made your decision. But what about your obligation to God? Render to God what belongs to God. Choose today whom you will serve.”

And, with that, those who had tried to set Jesus up, walked away.

For us, today, Jesus gives the same instruction, “Render to God what belongs to God.” But, with this, Jesus doesn’t give us an easy formula for determining how we resolve the tension between God and all the worldly pressures we face - our obligations to family, work, community, country, ourselves.

We can be tempted to want some sort of “pie chart” that can show us how much we must set aside for God and then we can know how much belongs to us and to Caesar.

Churches can even fall for this temptation when we talk about stewardship as if it were only about money. We can be deceived into thinking that if we only give God an appropriate portion of our money, then we are okay. The rest is for us.

But, the reality is that each of us is indelibly imprinted and stamped not with Caesar’s image but with the image of God. And, Jesus’ words echo in our ears - Render to God what belongs to God.

God is not a section of a pie chart. We can’t compartmentalize and parcel out our obligation to God. Stewardship isn’t just about money. It’s about how we live our lives and what images are on the coins we carry around in our pocketbooks – all those things, other than God, to which we give our loyalty and our allegiance.

One of my seminary professors used to say, “God doesn’t want ten percent of anything. God wants it all.”

I think Jesus may have been trying to teach us that our obligation to God is all-encompassing, and when we can really take that in and make it our operating principle – the way we attempt to live our lives, then all the other priorities and loyalties of our lives – family, work, country, community, ourselves – can make sense. We can be balanced, whole, free people – in God’s image as we were created.

So, I invite you to join me today – perhaps it's time to take a look at the images on the coins in our pocketbooks – all those things to which we give loyalty and allegiance. But, a word of caution as we do that.

Jesus can be just as big a threat to us as he was to the Pharisees and Herodians two thousand years ago. Jesus can threaten our comfortable assumptions about what is of real value and how we parcel out and compartmentalize our lives. The words of Jesus can still reveal the hidden hypocrisy of our lives. And, that can indeed be threatening.

Today, can we see that we –each of us and all of us – are indelibly imprinted and stamped with God's image, not Caesar's image, not the image of the culture around us? And then, can we have the resolve, with God's grace, to live our lives with that amazing knowledge and recognition, truly knowing who we are and whose we are? Because then, and only then, can we be the balanced, whole, free people God created us to be.

AMEN.