

Reflection for October 18, 2020

Beloved friends,

² [I] always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in [my] prayers, constantly ³ remembering before our God your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters^[a] beloved by God, that he has chosen you.

(based on 1 Thessalonians)

This Sunday's text is the first of three debates between Jesus and Jewish leaders, each of which ends by Jesus astounding and ultimately silencing his opponents. It asks the difficult [theological] question: What is the nature of right relation between obedience to the state and obedience to God?

"It's a trap!" This famous line from the third Star Wars movie is one of my favourites.

Today's story from Matthew finds the Pharisees and Herodians setting a trap for Jesus. They offered false praise of Jesus before posing a question—Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? Maybe I watch too many police procedural shows, but I want to tell Jesus "Don't do it, it's entrapment!" The Greek word [*pagideusosin*] used has the connotation of ensnaring someone in their own words. The question was meant to offer Jesus no alternative but to either defy Caesar or alienate the oppressed residents of Palestine, which likely included most of his supporters. The attempted entrapment is typical of controversy stories, where the challenge is meant to confuse or confound Jesus, thereby demonstrating power over him. In true Jesus form, he finds another way. He widens the question so that it has little to do with politics. Jesus called the authorities out, naming their game, "Why are you putting me to the test? Show me the coin used for the tax." (v.18-19).

The emperor's image and inscription on the coin were reminders that the Roman empire was present in every realm of their lives. The image and the inscription also identify who controls the economy. The fact that they produced the coin so quickly also exposes the extent to which everyone, including (or especially) the Pharisees and the Herodians, have been participating in Caesar's economy. They are all trading in Caesar's economy, so they are legally obligated to pay the tax.

And here Jesus does not encourage those at the margins to defy the empire and jeopardize their lives.

The question in Matthew 22 about paying taxes was not just a political question. It was also a moral and theological question. What is legal is not necessarily moral. What is lawful from Rome's perspective might not be acceptable to God. (We can think of many examples where things might be legal but weren't just – slavery is the first thing that pops into my mind). Hence, even as one pays taxes due to Caesar, one should also pay what is due to God. Jesus leaves it up to us to decide what is owed to whom. If the coin bears the image of Caesar and so we give it back to Caesar, what is it that bears image of God?

So, what is the relationship between the political and theological aspects of "paying?" Paying to both Caesar and God was not so much about checking off both boxes or keeping both of them equally happy but about carefully considering the complexity of the issue at hand. While people pay taxes to Rome out of obligation, they "pay" to God because of their calling and their commitment to promote an alternative kingdom, an alternate way of being. The tender compassion of God for God's children whom God made in God's own image is the inspiration for all the rendering we do, it is the taproot of our political actions.

As Warren Carter has noted, an imperial tax can be paid without the payment being a vote of support for Rome or its ethos. Paying taxes acknowledges Rome's political power but not its moral authority to rule. That moral authority belongs to God. Which is why Jesus quickly adds that one must pay to God the things that are due to God. But the "coinage" of God's kingdom is of a radically different nature than that of Caesar. God does not trade in Caesar's currency. The whole nature and trajectory of God's kingdom that Jesus has established, and is inviting us to participate in, is fundamentally at odds with Caesar's. Which is why while people must pay to both Caesar and God, they must pay them not only for different reasons but in entirely different currencies.

The coin has Caesar's image on it, so that is what we pay back to Caesar. Paying to God and participating in the divine kingdom entails repenting of the ways they have been complicit in the Roman empire and its agenda. Paradoxically, then, people can pay that taxes empire has imposed upon them while actively resisting it and working to promote the alternative kingdom, "on earth as it is in heaven".

Jesus was Immanuel, who walked among us and showed us who God is – faithful, holy, generous, patient, truthful, compassionate, loving. When we look at each other and truly see the image of God looking back, and we treat each other and all of creation with those same gifts of the Spirit that God gave us, that is when we are showing our allegiance to God. That is when we are giving back to God what was God's in the first place.

Jesus is complicating his listeners' paradigm for engaging the empire. It is an interesting text to explore around election time. I don't know a preacher worth their salt who hasn't gotten in trouble at some point for being too political in the pulpit. We would like to think we can keep those two spheres completely separate, our private faith and our public

actions. But a faith that lives only in the church building, that doesn't affect our actions in the world isn't much of a faith at all. This passage tells us that we have the challenging, sometimes exhausting, work of discerning how we live out these dual allegiances in our lives. Jesus's question and answer links the image and title on the coin with the tax both naming and *limiting* that which is due the emperor. Everything else belongs to God.

It is a challenge for us today. The pandemic has shown cracks in our political and economic system, as life goes on without much change for some, while others are devastated by the loss of income. Where the billionaires gain more and more, and where thousands face eviction because they can't pay their rent. Times like these often make us turn insular, taking care of ourselves and those we love first. However, this passage should make us look at that attitude, as natural as it is. Some United Church leaders have seen these disparities and are calling on the Canadian government to initiate a guaranteed livable income program. This may be seen as too political for some people, I think that they are simply demonstrating their duty to God's alternative kingdom where none go hungry, where we love our neighbour as ourselves.

The coin bears Caesar's image, but we are made in the image of God. We are God's children, called out of our private lives of faith. Called in this time and place to create a restless, forward moving way of life in which we trust in God's promises, entering into the concrete struggles of the world and act in ways that reflect God's image – an image of love, of hope, of abundance.

I wonder:

- How you choose when your duties to God and country seem to be at odds with another?
- How you show allegiance to God in your public life?
- What you give back to God?

Forgive us, O God,
when we stumble in the darkness
and turn away from your face.
Strengthen us to walk in your brightness
and live in your ways.
Enlighten the shadows
that keep us from growing
in your love and light.
Shower us with your grace,
that we might shine as your people
upon this earth.

(inspired by Psalm 99)

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