

A Sermon by the Very Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian

Trinity Episcopal Church

18 October 2020

Proper 24A: Isaiah 45:1-7 ; Psalm 96:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

“Tax Return”

First century Jews paid a lot of taxes –a temple tax, land taxes, customs and trade taxes. It brings to mind a Beatles song called *Taxman* (or just another day in New York State):

If you drive a car, I'll tax the street. If you try to sit, I'll tax your seat.

If you get too cold, I'll tax the heat. If you take a walk, I'll tax your feet. (George Harrison, 1966)

But the tax in today's Gospel reading was a particularly egregious payment called the Imperial Tax – a required annual tribute to Rome. Imagine it – the people were required to pay support of the empire occupying their land, oppressing them, and crushing them.

Now enter the Pharisees and Herodians – both Jewish sects – political parties – with intense dislike for each other and entirely different views on this issue. The Pharisees opposed paying the tax to their oppressors. And while the Herodians didn't like the tax either, they *did* like the local power that Rome permitted them. They endorsed paying it.

These rival factions agreed on almost nothing, but they *were* united in one thing – ensnaring Jesus, whose growing influence and message of social and economic justice threatened them both. They want rid of him. So, they plan to trip him up publicly and set him up for trouble –arrest, trial, and perhaps even execution – by asking a question which will get Jesus in hot water no matter how he answers.

And the question is this: *Is it lawful or not to pay the Imperial tax to the Emperor?*

To speak against the Imperial Tax would invite charges of sedition/treason against Rome. To speak in favor of the tax would tag him as a Roman sympathizer or even as a collaborator. Those present must have listened with the bated breath of suspense and perhaps with anxiety. How *would* Jesus answer? Which side would he choose?

Jesus begins by asking for a coin used for the tax. He is handed a denarius, a coin stamped with Caesar's likeness and the words, *Tiberius Caesar, august and divine son of Augustus high priest*. Jesus then asks his own question: Whose image is this and whose title? The answer is obvious –Caesar's. So, Jesus says, “Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's.”

How could this be? Jesus seems not only to have picked a side, but he chose their oppressor. One can imagine the smug grins on some faces while others reflected dismay or even horror...until Jesus adds this phrase: *...and render to God the things that are God's*.

And with those words, Jesus turns the very tables that others tried to turn on him. Some might say that Jesus was clever to evade their trap and avoid trouble on both sides. How wise to be non-committal, to avoid taking a position and risking his growing popularity.

Better to give everyone a little bit of what they want and no one a complete response. Keep them guessing. Sly one, that Jesus.

Really? Is *that* who you believe Jesus to be? Is *that* what you believe he is saying?

Jesus is not endorsing a policy of oppression, nor is he taking a posture of appeasement. He is not traveling a squidgy middle ground just to save his own neck. He is not inciting people into lawlessness, nor is he excusing those who abuse their authority. As one scholar so wisely puts it, “Jesus is not tidying, he is testing (Spaulding, 2011).

He is calling leaders *and* followers into a deeper level of accountability and fidelity... because no matter whose picture appears on a government coin, no matter whose signature appears on a government check, faithful integrity demands of us a different currency. In contrast to the denarius in his hand, stamped with the image of a cruel leader who considered himself divine, the coin of *our* mind, heart, and spirit, is marked by a different icon and title.

And God said, Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.

Genesis 1:26-27

We are made – spiritually stamped – in *God’s* image, which is to say that we are made in the image of Love. Love is the mark of who we are and whose we are. And Love is the currency we are called to carry and to exchange in this world.

So, to render (or give back) to God ...is to render our very selves – to devote our lives and pledge our allegiance, before and above all things, to the power of Love. And in a good, true, and just world, Love *is* the inspiration of all good, true, and just authority.

But how do we respond when those in authority are not always good, true, and just? Nothing in this Gospel story and nothing Jesus says in it pretends this is a simple question. Nothing in this homily would dare suggest a simple answer. At a time when we as a people seem far less tolerant of contemplation and reflection, and much more inclined to quick fixes, catchy slogans, and channel surfing, we may not love a Gospel like this one, which, as that scholar said, does not tidy, but tests.

And in that, I believe that Jesus is inviting us to test as well – that before we endorse *any* position, consider *any* response, sign an oath of loyalty to any person or take any action, we must first do what he did in this story – we must examine the coin being offered to us and honestly name the image we see there. And we must frankly evaluate how closely that image resembles the face of Love.

*Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,
and render to God the things that are God’s.*

Of course, in a perfect world, those “things” would be identical. And in an imperfect world? We can only pay our spiritual tax where we believe it will bring the most true, good, and just return.

Amen.