

Sermon, Proper 24A, 20th Sunday after Pentecost, Oct. 18, 2020, Jane A.

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“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22: 21) These words are famous words: still confounding to us today. Jesus’ enigmatic response to the Pharisees and Herodians begs so many questions! This is not a casual interchange. The stakes have actually become rather high. In terms of the narrative flow, Jesus entered triumphantly into Jerusalem one day ago. “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” shout the crowds. The whole city is in turmoil and everyone is asking: “Who is this?” Jesus proceeds to clear the Temple of the money changers, and then tells the three parables we heard in recent weeks.

However, it begins to dawn on the Pharisees that Jesus is speaking of them, that they are not actually fit to tend God’s vineyard. The Pharisees are meant to be the good guys. The word ‘Pharisee’ means one who is set apart. They are devoted to God, and to the keeping and interpretation of the Torah. There are Pharisees who seek out Jesus and what Jesus has to teach, such as Nicodemus. But many have come to enjoy their special status too much. As the Pharisees begin to realize they are losing their authority as the guardians of holiness, they begin to plot together how they might ensnare Jesus.

Yet they don't even have the guts to face Jesus directly! They send their students instead. First, they attempt to flatter Jesus, calling him Teacher. They tell him that they have heard Jesus is truthful and teaches God's truth. Jesus also regards no one with partiality. Translated literally, this means that Jesus does not look into the face of the person and so is not concerned with what they look like. In other words, Jesus does not regard outward appearances but is able to discern what is in a person's heart. Then the trap is set. "Tell us, then, what you think. (Because, Jesus, with your reputation as a prophet, we really want to know). Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Jesus is immediately aware of the malice behind the question. "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?" (Matthew 22: 18) This question is a classic dilemma: there is no way of answering it that does not get Jesus into trouble, either politically or spiritually. The taxes in question were imposed by the Roman government, an occupying power. The tax was a poll tax. A poll tax is one that is levied on each individual, hence the necessity for a census. This is recorded famously in the second chapter of Luke: "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered..." A poll tax can be heinous in itself as it is levied on each individual regardless of ability to pay.

It was also necessary to pay the Roman tax with coins. The poor generally paid in kind or bartered for their needs. Having to convert whatever goods they did

have to money was also a burden. It opened the door to their being exploited. Is it any wonder that in Jesus' day tax collectors were reviled? If Jesus says that it *is* lawful to pay the tax to the emperor, he loses the trust of those for whom he seems to care most: the poor, the widowed, the sick, the vulnerable. On the other hand, if Jesus says that it is *not* lawful to pay the tax, he risks being identified by Rome as an insurrectionist. Either way Jesus answers this question, the Pharisees have effectively gotten rid of this Rabbi who inconveniently sees through them and dares to challenge their authority.

Jesus, too, makes a classic gambit by answering the Pharisees' question with another question. Jesus tells them to show him the coin used for the tax. They bring him a denarius. (A denarius is a silver coin comparable to about a day's wages). Jesus asks them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answer—and there is no getting out of this: "The emperor's." The literal translation of: "Whose head is this?" is whose *image* is this? The Greek word is *eikon*. On one side of the coin is the head of Tiberius. On the other is the inscription: "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus and high priest." The emperor is regarded as divine: a god. The issue for devout Jews then becomes one of idolatry. This use of this coin—even handling this coin—could be construed as violating the first two commandments.

The Pharisees had believed they set up Jesus very cleverly indeed. Yet what strikes me most forcibly reading today's Gospel lesson is this: *Jesus comes to this exchange empty-handed*. He has to ask the Pharisees to show him the coin. The fact that they can produce it shows that it is they who are trapped. Ostensibly they pay—and have been paying—this tax all along: hypocrites indeed. No wonder they are amazed; no wonder they left Jesus and went away.

The fact that Jesus's pockets are empty says something profound about how Jesus engages the powers. This is the Jesus we see when he is tempted by Satan, the deceiver. Jesus has been fasting for forty days and is famished. Surely this is not the condition in which one wants to face any kind of test. In the third temptation, the devil promises Jesus earthly power. "...The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" (Matthew 4: 8-10)

I hear the echo in today's Gospel: "Give to God what is God's." Is that not how the traps of our lives are sprung? When I looked up the text in Exodus for the first two commandments, I noticed that they come together with this initial phrase: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery..." The commandments against idolatry have a context. These

commandments are not arbitrary, imposed by a God who has no care for us. God is continually leading us out of whatever enslaves us, whatever traps us, up to and including death itself.

I still remember the day that I had to surrender, and admit that I was powerless over money. I am thankful that I have not forgotten how that felt. I was terrified. I had come up empty. But an amazing thing happened. Like the tide returning, hope began to well up in me. The most marvelous thing was that I was able to pray again. I had not even been aware that there was so much of myself that I was afraid to show to God. I learned what it is to have peace. But maybe you are like me in these past months, and have found yourselves coming up empty, not knowing what to do. There are too many things to grieve, there are too many things that need our care. It is a hard place to be. Hope is elusive. Yet in the beautiful clear, blue skies we saw earlier this week there was also emptiness. A sky empty of clouds was the perfect backdrop for the glorious October colors of the trees. As the light left the skies, now in early evening, the panoply of stars could be revealed all the more clearly.

A few weeks ago we heard that wonderful hymn from Philippians 2:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness...”

We have a God who did not and does not fear emptiness. Jesus made his own emptiness an offering. If we bring our own emptiness to God, there are no guarantees. Yet having done so in prayer, there is every chance that grace will follow. At the very least we know that we are not alone; Jesus understands our condition. Jesus is with us always.