

Messiah Moravian Church
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Twenty-first Sunday After Pentecost, Year A
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Matthew 22:15-22

MONEY, POLITICS AND RELIGION—OH MY!

Do you remember the scene from the movie *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy, Toto, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man are walking through the Dark Woods, and they began to chant about the dreaded creatures they might meet: "Lions and tigers and bears, oh my"?

Once upon a time, money and politics and religion were three dreaded topics that people did not talk about in polite company. Discussing them in public felt too personal and potentially too divisive. People feel strongly about these matters, and they don't want to be told what to do or believe. But now? Oh my, how things have changed!

In today's Gospel passage Jesus addresses all three topics in his verbal sparring match with Pharisees and Herodians. Until I read a commentary by John Petty, I thought I knew what this passage meant. I now think I was shortsighted about the importance of the historical and cultural contexts of the confrontation. Let me provide some background information that I hope doesn't sound too much like an ancient history lecture.

By the time of Matthew's writing around 80 CE, the Pharisees were the dominant tradition within Judaism. The Herodians were followers and supporters of Herod Antipas who ruled Galilee and Perea from 4 BCE to 39 CE. The Jewish population perceived the Herodians as co-conspirators with the Roman occupiers. Up until this point in the gospel, Jesus had been dealing with only religious leaders. But with the arrival of the Herodians, representatives from the political sphere have entered the discussion, and they could influence Roman officials in matters of life or death. Normally Pharisees and Herodians were rivals, yet here they are united in their opposition to Jesus.

First century Jews paid numerous taxes, such as temple, land and custom taxes, just to name three major ones. The tax mentioned in today's passage was a particularly galling one because it was the Imperial tax paid to Rome to support the Roman occupation of Israel. Incredibly, each year Jews in the first century were required to pay their oppressors a denarius, or one day's wage, to support their own oppression. Needless to say, Jews hated the tax, and some individuals, such as the Zealots, dangerously refused to pay.

The tax was vigorously debated in Jerusalem. So the Pharisees and the Herodians baited their trap for Jesus with a very tricky question: is it lawful to pay the occupation tax to Caesar or not?

If Jesus says the tax should be paid, he loses much of his political support among the common folk. If he says the tax should not be paid, the Herodians are there to accuse him of sedition.

Jesus's next move is an exceptionally ingenious political one. This entire conversation takes place after Jesus has entered the temple. Coins with Roman images and inscriptions of the "divine" Emperor were not allowed in the Temple, as forbidden by the first and second Commandments. Moneychangers set up shop outside the temple gates to exchange the offensive Roman and foreign coins into acceptable Temple coins at a 50% profit.

A first century denarius bore the image of Tiberius Caesar on the obverse side. On the reverse side it was inscribed with "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine August."

By asking for a denarius Jesus lets the crowd know that he did not have one. But when the Pharisees and Herodians produce the denarius, they reveal that they had one of the forbidden coins on their person within the sacred space, thereby breaking both Commandments. Also, either intentionally or unintentionally, they signal allegiance to the Roman imperial state over their own Jewish religious requirements. Hypocrites, indeed!

To twist the knife even more, Jesus asks whose "head" is on the coin. The Greek word "eikon" is more accurately translated "image" rather than the NRSV word "head." This recalls, as Jesus thoroughly intended, the Torah prohibitions on "graven images." His message is clear: The image of Caesar is an idol.

To ratchet up the pressure yet another notch, Jesus then asks what inscription appears on the coin. By asking for the inscription in front of a Jewish crowd, Jesus exposes the pagan ideology of the occupying Romans and the pretensions of those who collaborate with them.

"Give, therefore, to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

The saying has often been used to support the separation of church and state. I firmly believe in the separation of church and state but I now think it is inappropriate to apply

this statement to modern times. If Jesus had said "but give to God what is God's," perhaps one could argue that Jesus was creating separate spheres for the political and the religious.

Instead, he uses the conjunction "and" and not "but." By doing so, Jesus slyly undermines imperial authority at the same time he exposes the religious leadership as collaborators with the oppressors. Every Jew observing this scene would know that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Psalm 24: 1). Everything is God's--no exceptions, he reminds them. The Pharisees and Herodians are bested and so they leave.

By including this episode, might Matthew be inviting us to declare our allegiance? Perhaps the real question isn't whose image is on the *coin*, but rather whose image is on *us*. It would be hard for Jesus' audience to listen to his words and not hear echoes of Genesis 1, where God declares we are made in God's own image, which often gets lost in conversations about money and politics.

We may feel strongly about our political loyalties but before we are Democrats, Republicans, or Independents, we are Christian. How we spend our money is our business and no one else's. Yet if we forget in whose image we have been created, we may be tempted to believe that our true value is based on bank accounts and possessions.

Jesus raises important questions here, but he doesn't give pat answers. Certain elements of our lives are, indeed, part of the world order and should be "rendered to Caesar." But our deepest person and self are God's, and if we remember that, then our lives take on greater focus and meaning.

No matter what we do or say, no matter where we go, no matter what happens to us, we are first, foremost, and forever God's own beloved children. And that identity will frame our behavior, urging and aiding us to be the persons God calls us to be.