

OCTOBER 19, 2008
PENTECOST 23
“HEADS OR TAILS:
WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?”

Let us pray: Sovereign God, give us both the wisdom and a bit of the wit of Jesus that we might face the issues and questions of our day with the amazing truth of the Gospel. It's in Jesus' name that I pray. Amen.

The tension is mounting! The stories Jesus keeps telling are getting edgier and edgier. After that one about the wicked tenants in the vineyard we heard a couple of weeks ago, Matthew the Gospel writer tells us, “*they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.*”

They were getting tired of Jesus ending his stories “*So the last will be first and the first last,*” or “*many are called but few are chosen,*” stories that seemed aimed at

them—the religious leaders—whether priests or elders or scribes or Sadducees, or as in today’s story, Pharisees and Herodians.

Jesus, as today’s story makes so perfectly clear, was a master of **indirection** and **irony**. It’s clear that Jesus’ elusiveness was beginning to take its toll on his frustrated opponents. Today our text begins with the Pharisees, that religious party of Jesus’ day who in many ways were the good guys—lay people, not priests, who really loved the Law, the Torah--and sought to live their lives and influence others to live their lives in strict conformity to God’s will.

Jesus’ penchant for what they considered Sabbath-breaking, his sharing table fellowship with unclean sinners and for telling stories that seemed to reflect badly on their well-meaning piety and strict moral code from the earliest days of his ministry in Galilee were beginning to put them on edge. And so the Pharisees, Matthew says, “*went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.*”

They wanted to catch this sly “fox” Jesus, you see, catch him in the trap of his own words.

But then Matthew adds, “*so they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians*” — the only place in Matthew’s Gospel where the Herodians are mentioned, meaning the party of Herod, the corrupt puppet ruler of the Jews installed by the Romans who was despised by the Pharisees. So you see, here we have an interesting alliance between bitter enemies, an example of the old political adage, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

So the Pharisees and Herodians appear before Jesus in an effort to entrap him in his own words, which, as Matthew’s ensuing story of the trial and passion of Jesus will show, probably means an effort to adduce evidence that would be sufficient to convict Jesus in a court of law — evidence made even more compelling since it could be

attested to by different and opposing religious and political factions.

So they approach Jesus asking ingratiatingly: “*Teacher—rabbi—we know that you are sincere.*” (The Greek word literally means “truthful”—a straight-shooter, a person of integrity.) “*We know that you are a truth-teller and that you teach the way of God in truth.*” Notice how they go out of their way to mention Jesus’ reputation for truth-telling twice. Moreover, they say, “*we know that you show deference to no one*”—and then repeating themselves for emphasis—“*for you do not regard people with partiality—with bias—with prejudice.*” Quite a string of compliments even if we tend to hear them in a rather snide tone of voice, knowing they’re trying to trap Jesus. “*So,*” they ask, finally getting to the bottom line of their inquiry, “*tell us then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor*”—“Caesar,” in Greek—“*or not?*”

A simple enough question, right, to which a simple “yes” or “no” ought to suffice? Interestingly, notice that this isn’t a question about the interpretation of a particular piece of scripture or necessarily even a religious question at all. Here we have a good practical question, with legal, political and economic implications. But, of course, these Pharisees and Herodians were no dummies. For this, in an important sense, was **the** question of Jesus’ age for anyone who wanted to be a law-abiding, Torah-reverencing, observant Jew. Since the Jews were the political subjects of the Gentile Romans, could a Jew in good conscience pay taxes or was such an act of political subservience an act of disloyalty, an act of bad faith or even—to cite a certain vice presidential candidate’s jibe in the current election—is it an unpatriotic act to pay taxes?

Complicating further the matter was the fact that since Augustus Caesar’s day, who

served as emperor at the time of Jesus' birth, the Roman Caesars had declared themselves to be divinities — gods — and cults of the emperors including temples had sprung up all over the empire. The problem for observant Jews, as you may know, was that Roman coinage not only carried the image of the emperor on its “head” side but Caesar was also referred to as a god, making a simple little Roman denarius doubly dangerous as a “graven image” and an idol, both sins against the first commandment. Could a good Jew be a good subject of Rome and pay his or her taxes, the Pharisees and Herodeans asked Jesus, hoping thereby to trap him between a rock and a hard place?

But Jesus, as we should by now be used to, was rarely one to simply answer a question “yes” or “no” and particularly one that aimed to entrap him. So instead, Jesus responded by asking to see “*the coin used for the tax,*” presumably as a good Jew not carrying such Roman coinage on his person.

So someone brought him a denarius, a silver coin worth roughly the cost of a laborer's daily wage. And Jesus asked, "*Whose head is this and whose title?*" And they answered him, "*Caesar's—the emperor's.*" And Jesus shrewdly slips the snare they'd set for him even as he has now baited his own trap with their coin, a trap that snaps shut on them as he concludes: "*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.*" It was an answer, Matthew bothers to tell us, that "*so amazed*" the Pharisees and Herodians that "*they left him and went away,*" scratching their heads, I imagine.

Yet again, Jesus had eluded his opponents, outwitting them by slipping between the horns of the dilemma in which they had attempted to trap him and instead stuns them into silence. Clever Jesus, we think. But remember that the final charge brought against Jesus in Luke's Gospel would be just this: "*We found this man*

perverting our nation forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah.” Clever, perhaps, but not finally so clever as to elude the political and religious charges of his opponents that would culminate in the successful plot against his life.

All of that is true, of course. But I think that the real genius of Jesus’ clever response is rather his leaving the answer yet again in the hands of his questioners. I like to think of Jesus not just eluding their trap but instead inviting them and us to see that simple “yes” or “no” answers are seldom, if ever, the **right** answers to the most important and difficult of life’s questions—and especially to the big “religious” and “political” and “economic” questions of our day. For Jesus shows us that life lived in faithfulness to God is ever and always a matter of struggling to discern how we are to give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are

God's. For notice that Jesus didn't say, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's **or** to God the things that are God's. Jesus said "**and**", not "either/or" but **and**.

In other words, Jesus is saying "**you figure it out**. It's your job to decide what is legitimately Caesar's and what is rightfully God's." Now, of course, we're not without help here. Scripture speaks clearly, as in Genesis about how God is the creator of all that is, and the Psalmist says simply, "*The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.*" All there is **is** God's. So it's not as if Caesar is on a par with God, a real rival of God for authority.

But Jesus is suggesting to his questioners who want to entrap him in a moral dilemma that there may be areas of life—all of which belongs to God—in which Caesar, nonetheless, has a legitimate claim—to our loyalty and our money. That is, an important part of our calling by God is our vocation as citizens of the kingdoms of

this world, where God restrains evil in the world through the powers-that-be, what Martin Luther called the “left-hand kingdom of God.” But as Lutherans have learned through the ages, not least during Hitler’s Third Reich, this does not mean being loyal to or obeying the political powers in all times and places. As Peter says in Acts there are times when we must “*obey God rather than humans.*” Ours as Christians is the never-ending task of deciding what is legitimately owed to the political powers that be in the context of our supreme loyalty to God.

And, more than that, in our own democratic political system in which we elect our own leaders and representatives, there is a sense in which we are our own “Caesars” — that the responsibility of government is in our hands. And so we have the responsibility of doing our best to discern not only right or wrong — between what is God’s and what is Caesar’s but also

what is the relative good—what is the better—or sometimes the least bad—candidate or piece of legislation in a world that is not perfect but a world in which nonetheless we are called to exercise our active citizenship.

This is why our ELCA encourages us to see as a part of our responsibility as church to be “**a community of moral deliberation,**” a people who dare to take on the most important and pressing issues of our day in conversation with one another—struggling to discern what is Caesar’s and what is God’s in the midst of the great issues of our day. For example, how ought we as Christian citizens vote on Prop 8 that seeks to overturn marriage equality in California? This is something about which we have no clear Word from God on high or from the church although there are many folks out there in our society who think they do and are pouring lots of money into trying to make us think so too.

So how ought we to approach such a controversial issue—and what are our resources in doing so? I personally don't think sermons—being monological—are the place to do this. Much better that we engage one another in conversation about such issues in which give and take and pros and cons and questions can be shared freely in the spirit of moral discernment that seeks the truth.

Our Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah, I hope you noticed, helps us as it did Israel in Isaiah's day, to see that God is free to work in the world as God sees fit—even in ways that might well seem “politically incorrect,” as we say, to those who view themselves as God's chosen. It's in today's Hebrew scripture that we find Isaiah prophesying the then heretical and unpatriotic-sounding promise that Cyrus—the pagan leader of the Persian Empire—had been anointed by God (the word means literally appointed “messiah”)

to rescue Israel from her bondage in Babylon. To American ears this would be akin to hearing that President Amadebinejad of Iran had been anointed by God to be the agent of our deliverance from our current preoccupation with terrorism. It wouldn't make sense. It would seem nonsense. It would seem heresy. But you know what? The Word of God spoken through Isaiah was right. And the pagan Persian became the instrument of Israel's redemption and return.

Go figure!
The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.