

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
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Matthew 22:15-22

“What belongs to whom?”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

I'll tell you a secret that really is no secret at all!

I love Jesus.

I think you all know that.

I love that he was so brave and so radical; I love that he loved un-lovable people and called them his own; I love that he gave us the 8 Beatitudes that are totally life-changing and counter-cultural; I love that he walked around with an entourage that did not quite understand who he was or what he was saying but he loved them anyway; I love that he was a revolutionary and both courageous and gentle; I love that he talked to women and held children; I love that he touched and healed people with his hands defying all purity laws. I love Jesus.

And there are certain stories in the Gospels that make me love him even more. I have favorite Jesus stories and today's passage from the Book of Matthew is one of those stories.

Jesus is so smart. Bless his heart.

I know he is here among us, so I should say BLESS YOUR HEART JESUS.
I JUST LOVE YOU.

Let's review what is happening in this story.

The Pharisees are plotting—trying to figure out how to entrap Jesus. They gather and scheme, and they enlist their own group AND some Herodians too. Now THAT is an unexpected combination! The Pharisees were the principal representatives of Judaism in Jesus' day—they were concerned with the interpretation and transmittal of the teachings of the Torah. The Herodians were followers of and loyal to the Rome-endorsed Herod dynasty. This union of forces—the Pharisees and Herodians—is a powerful combination.

Now remember Jesus is a radical. He is not welcome in traditional Jewish circles because he does so many things outside traditional Jewish law.

And he is not welcome among Herodians because everything Jesus stands for directly contradicts the rule of Herod the King and Caesar the Emperor.

So the Pharisees team up with the Herodians to entrap Jesus and they think they have a water-tight, fool-proof strategy.

Step one of their strategy: flatter Jesus...

Then the Pharisees went and took counsel how to entangle him in his talk. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men."

Here they are about to ensnare Jesus, entrap him, pose an impossible question that will create a no win situation for him, but they are being ever so sweet...
Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully...
Okay, step one is flatter Jesus.

Step two is corner Jesus.

They corner him by asking a question that will alienate some group no matter how Jesus answers.

Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?

They sound so innocent, like they just want to know. The pretense is: we are eager to hear your wise answer to our benign question. But the question is not benign at all...it is a loaded question that has no right answer.

If Jesus declares it IS lawful to pay taxes, he will delight the Herodians who support Herod, Caesar and the Empire BUT he will scandalize the religious establishment who experience the heavy Caesar-imposed taxes as unfair.

If Jesus says it is NOT lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, he will delight his own followers whose support is his best protection against arrest, but he will be charged with sedition.

The trick question has no right answer. No matter how Jesus responds, he gets into trouble. In today's political terms, it is a "gotcha" question.

In fact, it is a dangerous question. Jesus' own safety is at stake, and crowd around him knows it.

But our beloved Jesus is our beloved, smart and astute Jesus. And he will not be flattered and he will not be cornered and he will name his opponents for what they are. *Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?"* Then Jesus asks for a coin and is given a one by a Pharisee. *"Show me the money for the tax." And they brought him a coin.*

Now Jesus turns the tables on them.

The Pharisees are not supposed to be carrying coins that bear the image of the Emperor, it is a graven image...forbidden by the first and second of the Ten Commandments...the fact that they have those coins in their pockets is a violation of Jewish law. All their denari bearing the image of Caesar should have been swapped for Temple coins by the money-changers at the Temple. So right away, Jesus has revealed that the pious Pharisees are not so pious after all!

And then Jesus asks: *"Whose likeness and inscription is this?"*

And they answer with precisely what is on the Roman coin: *"Caesar's."*

Then Jesus responds in a way that leaves the Pharisees and Herodians silenced and astounded...*Jesus said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."*

When they heard it, they marveled; and they left him and went away.

It is a remarkable answer: Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. Jesus knew THAT would silence his opponents because he knew that we are all made in the image of God, and so WE are God's. **We are called to give our lives to God—called to give our whole selves to God.** And that is not at all what his opponents wanted to hear.

By saying "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's..." Jesus protected himself, he could not be accused of fostering sedition.

But by adding "...and to God the things that are God's," Jesus, wise rabbi and teacher, made the exchange into a powerful lesson revealing one of the basic tenets of the faith he lived and preached. We all belong to God, we are made in God's image, we are God's own, he is saying. Give yourselves to God, completely. THAT is what really matters.

The early Christian author Quintus Tertullian writing in the third century, wrote this about the exchange, "Render to Caesar, Caesar's image, which is on the coin, and to God, God's image, which is on man."

Jesus responded to his opponents in a way that made them retreat and ponder his answer. And 2000 years later we find ourselves pondering his answer as well. Jesus' answer is profoundly compelling and warrants our deep consideration.

My dear brothers and sisters, I think Christians face a dual allegiance, and I think Jesus recognized that dual allegiance in his own time. We have an allegiance to the teachings and commandments of God AND we have an allegiance to the government under whose flag and laws we live. Christians have duties and obligations that are due to both of those realms and our challenge is to constantly decide: what do we owe and to whom?

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?” Matthew 22:17

This is not simply a question of economics or politics, **it is first and foremost a question of conscience.** Again I wonder: what do we owe and to whom?

If we recognize and want to honor our allegiance to God AND to the government under whose flag and laws we live, what do we do when those two loyalties conflict? What do we do when our allegiance to Caesar conflicts with our allegiance to God? What do we do as Christians when the God we serve and the government to which we have sworn allegiance pull us in two different directions and we are faced with divided loyalties?

Jesus' pithy answer to the loaded question—“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?”—suggests that BOTH the government AND God have a rightful claim to our allegiance. The Greek word for “render” is *apodote*, which literally means to “give what is due by obligation.”

I think Jesus is saying that neither side can be dismissed as making an illegal or unfounded claim for our allegiance—whether in the form of taxes or other obligations. Therefore Christians should render what is due to each entity until it comes to the point where obedience to one leads to a moral conflict with the other.

Jesus did not answer the question in a way that placed him at risk with either group in the crowd around him. Instead, he answered it a way that forces people of faith to balance our responsibilities as citizens of both an earthly realm and a spiritual realm. And I think this is hard.

I think Jesus is calling us to be acutely aware of our loyalty to God AND to our country. And I think it is an enormous challenge to discern what we are meant to do as Christians when our loyalty to God **conflicts** with our loyalty to country.

I wish there were easy answers. I wish this was clear, tidy and easy. But it is not. I think that as Christians we must be aware that we live in a world with our own contemporary Caesar's...and, as Christians, we must ask ourselves: how do we respond? What do we do when our Christian values are do not harmonize with our government's policies?

I have struggled for many years with these difficult questions. For me, as a Christian, a mother, a pacifist, and a believer that we are all children of God and the world is filled with my brothers and sisters, I have faced a very painful conflict as I both love my God and I love my country—but I am unable to support some of the policies of my government: mainly war and violence in any form.

As a Christian pacifist I cannot support killing done in my name. And I know that my government needs my money, my tax dollars, to finance war. And so I have prayed deeply on this very passage in Scripture that includes the question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes?”

In order to respond, Jesus asked for a Roman coin. He looked at the likeness of Caesar on the coin and said simply: “Render to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God.”

I have prayed deeply on this story, this question, and Jesus' answer.

As a Christian committed to the commandment , “Thou shall not kill,” Exodus 20:13, I have found myself torn between my loyalty to my God and my loyalty to my government.

When Jesus was asked, “Is it lawful to pay taxes?” he took a denari and looked at the face of Caesar on the Roman coin. Well, I have taken an American dollar and looked at the words on the bill. It says, “In God We Trust.” **And I do.**

In GOD I trust: those words have actually helped me settle the conflict I feel pulled between loyalty to God and loyalty to government. It is in **GOD** I trust.

Consequently, since 1982, I have withheld a portion of my federal taxes as a protest and a way to symbolically say: I will not, I cannot pay for weapons of war. In God I trust, and I feel led by God to make this witness.

Do I recommend that you and others become war tax resisters? No, I do not. What I **DO** recommend is that Christians think deeply about our love for God and our love for country and how we live out our loyalties to both.

I think we need to ask: To whom do we belong? How can we be active and loyal Christians and active and loyal citizens?

What I recommend is that we pray on our love of God and our love of country and determine what we are called to do when those two are not in harmony.

What I believe is that we live in two realms...the earthly realm and the spiritual realm and we must pray on how to be faithful...to both.

When I read this Bible story, I remember how much I love Jesus and how profoundly he has influenced my thinking and my life.

I hear him telling me, like a voice echoing through the ages: think deeply about your God and your country...think deeply and pray hard. If it is true that "In God We Trust" then determine what God is asking you to do as you wrestle with living in both the earthly realm and the spiritual realm.

I hear Jesus asking, like a voice echoing through the ages: what does it mean to "...render to God that which is God's?"

How do I give my life to God, be true to my Christian values and tenets, and still live in this world? What do I owe and to whom?

I have been reading this Bible story and asking these questions for decades and I am still grappling with the answer.

Being a Christian is not easy.

Being a Christian is not easy.

But we have Jesus' life, words and lessons, and we have prayer, and we have each other to help us find our way.

Amen.