

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost - Year A

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 45:1-7

Psalms 96:1-9[10-13]

I Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

10/22/2023

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

15Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said. 16So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. 17Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." 22When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

The Gospel of Our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

A Trap

Good morning! One of the most alien-like creatures on our planet is the incredible octopus. It's easily one of my favorite animals, regardless of how strange it looks. Like most people, stories of giant squids and the kraken made my appreciation for the venerable octopus less than lukewarm. But then I heard about their amazing intelligence, and the fact that they have essentially three brains. Those brains do amazing things with bodies that can essentially shape shift. They can not only change appearance and color, but they can change shape and fit through almost anything. They use these skills to do things like escape their tanks in aquariums to sneak across the floor and into other tanks to get a fresh fish snack late at night. They're escape artists, using tools or just their minds to escape things like sealed jars and other traps scientists have concocted. In today's text we see Jesus escape a trap also, though one with more serious consequences.

The Gospel lesson is one that is deceiving. It seems simple after an initial reading, but like our eight-armed friends, has a lot going on below the surface. If you remember, over the previous weeks we have been reading about Jesus' actions after he entered Jerusalem at the end of his earthly ministry. In the beginning his enemies approach him all together and demand answers. But after he successfully navigates the land mines, we see the groups of Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, scribes, and others retreat. What happens today is a new attack, one from the most unlikely of united forces; the Pharisees and the Herodians.

We don't know a ton about the Herodians, they are only mentioned here in the Gospel of Matthew, but it seems like they are a puppet group of leaders who sympathize with King Herod, a leader who himself is a puppet

vassal of the Roman Empire. The Herodians would have been strong supporters of giving appropriate deference and respect to the god that was Emperor Tiberius. The Pharisees, on the other hand, are about as different as you could get. They were strong Jewish supporters of a country that had its own leadership without anyone ruling over them. The Pharisees often get a bad reputation in Scripture, but this group of leaders would have been fervently working to call the Jewish people back to a life of faith and daily action. These two groups getting together in the Temple to quiz Jesus is like the USA and the USSR getting together at the height of the Cold War. But, as the saying goes, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and so they join forces.

Jesus is stuck. Depending on his answer he runs the risk of angering one of the groups. If he says that the Herodians are right, it could be argued that he believes the emperor to be a God, or is siding with the occupying force that controls the Jews. BUT! If he sides with the Pharisees, he becomes an enemy of the state. So, Jesus outsmarts them.

Here's a little background about the tax. Father Daniel J. Harrington writes that "*the tax under debate was the kensos ('poll tax' or 'head tax,' census in Latin). The payment of such a tax was a prerequisite for living peacefully as a subject of the Roman Empire and exercising the rights associated with that status... a poll tax was exacted from men, women, and slaves from ages twelve or fourteen to sixty five. This tax was to be paid in Roman currency.*"¹ But it gets even more interesting! You weren't supposed to have Roman currency in the Temple to begin with! All of it was supposed to be exchanged before setting foot inside. On each of these coins

¹ Harrington, Daniel J. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 310.

would have been an image of the current emperor. The word for the image could literally be translated as idol.² Jesus has just caught a bunch of pious Jews breaking the currency exchange rules in the Temple while literally carrying an idol of a false god in their pocket.

Jesus evaded the question with a non-answer, one that threw their hypocrisy back into their own faces. At the end of the story the text says that: *“when they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.”* Amazed is one way of saying it, the New English Translation reads that *“they were stunned.”* I find that to be a more accurate picture of how they probably felt.

Which brings us to Jesus’ non-answer: *“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”* It seems simple and straightforward, but at the core of the message Jesus is challenging us to decide which “world” we give the bulk of our time and energy. If we serve the empire, we produce results that go back to the system. But when we serve God, the fruits of our effort give glory to God. The text is a deeper question than simple “church and state.” Where our heart is, there our treasure will be also... Whomever or whatever we serve is where our work will give praise. Jesus calls us out, forcing us to name where our loyalties lie.

But he does even more than that too. In the beginning of the text his enemies clearly see the issue as one way or the other. Jesus challenges us to see the world in the more challenging and complex reality that it is. Things are rarely the simple black and white solution we want or expect, and Jesus,

² Skinner, Matthew. “Sermon Brainwave 926: Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost - October 22, 2023”. *Sermon Brainwave*. Podcast audio, October 15, 2023. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/926-21st-sunday-after-pentecost-ord-29a-oct-22-2023>

being the teacher that he is, uses this chance to remind us of that truth. The grey of the issue forces us to rethink our attitude and assumptions, putting us in a position to look at life in a new more faithful way. It's a chance that's never comfortable, but always rewarding. Showing us God is always willing and able to teach us, as long as we're ready to listen. Amen.