

Proper 24, Year A
Matthew 22:15-22
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Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

The Coin of the Realm
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

I confess. I've become a political junkie. I read the campaign news every morning. I click on every headline Yahoo puts up. I talk with friends. I cull their knowledge and bookmark their favorite blogs. You can imagine this was a big week for me. The last debate of this campaign season.

As I listened to the debate and the comments afterwards, I was reminded of the scripture we heard today—the story of Jesus drawn into a debate with the Pharisees and the Herodians.

You remember the scene. Jesus is at the end of his journey. He's teaching in the Temple courts. Already he's overturned tables belonging to money changers and dove sellers. Already he's excoriated those who would overlook the children and the lame—folks many would cast aside.

First he tells some stories—parables we call them. He compares two realms, two worlds, two reigns—the world that Caesar rules and the world that belongs to God. He contrasts the way the two worlds run, the values they hold, the way they treat their subjects. The one that Caesar rules is based on conquest, violence and greed.

The other world, the other realm—the world that Jesus calls the Kingdom of God. It's a place where all are welcome, a place where all are cared for, a place where all are loved. It's a realm where those who mourn are comforted; a place where the hungry are fed, the sick are cared for, the friendless are befriended. The realm of God is one based on mercy, justice and peace.

The stories Jesus tells stir up those who serve that other world—be it in the temple or in the halls of Roman power. Herodians and Pharisees line up against him. They set a trap—or so they think. First they flatter him. “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth....” Funny, isn't it, how flattery often falls on target. Then, they draw him into a debate. The question is on taxes. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

You need to know that both the Herodians and Pharisees have a dog in this fight. The Herodians have no problem paying taxes to the emperor. Indeed, those taxes pay their way. The Pharisees, on the other hand, can't abide such taxes. But more than that—they each want Jesus to fall into the trap, to lose his credibility, to fall flat on his face. For he challenges each of their false Gods.

Jesus asks the people gathered for a coin. They give him a denarius—a Roman coin used to pay the Roman tax and the Roman coin folks traded to pay the Temple tax. He takes it in his hand. He turns it side to side. He looks at it carefully—studying both sides of the coin. And then he says to them, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

A simple rule—don’t you think? One you and I can follow. Clear-cut really. “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and unto God that which is God’s.” It’s a this world, that world kind of rule. A rule that fits our compartmentalized lives. A rule for Sundays and the work of Sundays and a rule for the rest of the week.

Until you think about that coin. That coin that carried the image of Caesar and the words “son of the August divine” on one side and on the other the words “divine priest”. The realm of Caesar’s coin was Caesar’s world. All of it—both secular and sacred.

And what of the coin of Jesus’ realm—the realm of God. What image marks that coin? The image of God, I suppose.

And then I start to wonder—just what does the image of God look like? Whose face is on that coin? I find myself remembering the words of scripture. “In his image he created them, male and female he created them.” Whose face is on that coin? Yours and mine and all God’s children. We are the coin of that realm. You and I, we are the coin of the realm of God. How we use that coin, how we live our lives matter.

Jesus says, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” The choice those of us who follow Jesus are asked to make is to give to God that which is God’s—our bodies, our souls, our selves. All that we are and all that we have because it all belongs to God.

But what does such giving look like?

All week two images have floated in my mind—one a picture of my brother and a pal he found at a pool in Florida. They were kids—not more than five years old. Together they clasped hands, ran to the edge of the pool, laughed gleefully and jumped in.

The other a more recent image. It’s an image from my first week of paid ministry at St. Paul’s School and Church. It’s a picture of my friend Kenton standing at the top of the stairs at the school, smiling warmly and saying to me, “I’ve got your back.”

What does giving to God the things that are God’s mean? It means living with delight—smiling warmly and laughing gleefully. It means holding one another’s hand and having one another’s back. It means reaching out to one another and doing what we can to hold one another up for we are the coins of God’s realm. Thanks be to God.