

Ordinary 28A  
October 19, 2008  
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

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Isaiah 45:1-7 Psalm 96:1-9 [10-13] 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 **Matthew 22:15-22**

In Whose Image?

Today's Gospel reading contains what is probably one of the most oft-quoted sayings from the Bible: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." And when we hear these words, what's the first thing that pops into your mind? Anyone? What do you think today's sermon is going to be about?

Did someone say stewardship? Yes, this story is quite frequently used as the basis of a message about stewardship. And, it does happen to occur in our lectionary during the time of year when most congregations are beginning their annual stewardship campaigns. But it's not simply a story about money.

First, I'd like us to begin by setting the context. This is the last week we'll be spending on this particular chunk of text. Next week we'll be moving on to some texts to help us celebrate Reformation Sunday, and the week after that we'll observe All Saints Sunday. We've now spent several weeks in what is a relatively small piece of Matthew's Gospel.

We picked up the story on Jesus' second day in Jerusalem. As you'll remember, Jesus entered the temple and began to preach when his authority was challenged by the temple elders. In response, he told a series of three parables: (1) The parable of the two sons; (2) The parable of the wicked tenants; and, (3) The parable of the wedding banquet. All three of those parables were a direct challenge to the leadership of the temple elders. In effect, Jesus was saying that they should beware of becoming too assured of their status with God, because even though they were children of the covenant, certain things were expected of them.

We might well imagine the back room discussions that went on after the temple elders heard these parables. They were quite angry with Jesus. So in today's story, they decide on a different approach. They think they're going to trap him. The Pharisees – those people who resented the Roman occupation of Jerusalem but tolerated it as long as Rome didn't interfere with the practice of their religion – sent their students to Jesus to pose a question. Notice how skillfully the Pharisees avoided being directly involved in this plot? After all, if the Pharisees were seen to be questioning the legitimacy of Rome's tax, this might have stirred up trouble with their Roman occupiers. So they sent their students instead!

Along with the Pharisees' students went a group of Herodians. Now, we don't know much about this group. We do know the Herodians they were a secular

political party that supported the right of Herod the Great's successors to rule Palestine. They were Pro-Roman.

Both of these groups, either overtly or because it was politically expedient, supported Roman rule. They thought they had created such a clever question to trap Jesus. If Jesus said he was not in favor of the tax, then he would be viewed as a political enemy of Rome and could be done away with. If Jesus said he was in favor of the tax, then those who were against the Roman occupation would turn on Jesus. Surely the Pharisees must have been standing back, watching this exchange, and thinking to themselves, "A-HA! We've got him now!"

So they pose their question to Jesus: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" In response, Jesus asks someone to bring him a coin. Now, it's no wonder Jesus calls them hypocrites when he asks for this. He knows that someone in the crowd is going to be able to give him a coin immediately.

What is the hypocrisy, you ask? It's this: Having a Roman coin in the temple would have been breaking the law. In fact, even using a Roman coin *outside* of the temple could be considered breaking the Jewish law. For on one side was an image of the emperor – a graven image, prohibited in Exodus 20:4 – and on the other side an inscription that said, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus, High Priest." In this inscription, the emperor declared himself divine, placing himself in direct

opposition to God. And yet, here in the most holy place in the land, the temple, someone is able to immediately offer a Roman coin into evidence! Hypocrisy indeed.

We know the rest of the story. Jesus asks them whose image and title are on the coin. Why, the emperor's of course! And deftly side-stepping the trap laid for him, Jesus responds, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." We might well imagine that those who heard this and were amazed walked away scratching their heads, trying to figure out exactly what Jesus meant.

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As I've already mentioned, this story has often been used to talk about stewardship. It's not used that way simply because it talks about paying taxes and using money. There's actually a pretty good theological basis for that. Remember a couple of weeks ago my message was titled, "Whose Is It?" That was when we were looking at the parable of the wicked tenants, and I asked you to think about who owns this vineyard that we all live in. The answer, of course, is God. God made and owns all of creation. We're simply workers that have been placed in the vineyard to care for something that doesn't belong to us. We're the tenants.

Today's story is a sort of expansion on that notion. It brings up the notion of what we Lutherans call the Two Kingdoms. There is the earthly realm, which includes all things of this world, including governments. Then there's the kingdom of God. These are not two parallel entities. The kingdom of God totally encompasses everything that is in the earthly realm.

It's kind of like this orange. This is a crude analogy, but it was the best I could do. If you think of a better illustration, please let me know! We know that this orange contains the fruit inside. We'll think of that as the earthly realm. On the outside is the rind, which completely encompasses the earthly realm. So we can think of the outside of the orange being like the heavenly kingdom. It totally encompasses everything inside.

I think that's what Jesus was getting at with his response. He cleverly told his questioners that while Caesar rules here on earth, God is the one who's ultimately in command. Jesus' questioners would have understood this, because they believed that "foreign kings had power over Israel only by permission from God. Tax may be paid to Caesar because it is by God's will that Caesar rules."<sup>1</sup>

A lot of people have looked at this same text and somehow misread it as meaning that Jesus was talking about a separation between church and government. But this would be a misreading of the text. Jesus is saying that government has a

legitimate function, but at the same time, government only exists in the earthly realm. And that earthly realm always exists under the kingdom of God. Therefore, all that we are and all that we have rightly belongs to God.

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Now I could, at this point, turn this into a stewardship sermon and talk about how, because everything we have belongs to God, you should consider giving more to the church.

Instead, I'd like to give you a little gift. I'm going to pass this basket around, and everybody take one.

<PAUSE>

I'm giving you each a coin. I'm hoping that it will remind you that, even when times are tough, we are all still also members of that heavenly kingdom which always remains under God's beneficent rule. Despite the troubles and turmoils we might go through in the earthly realm, God still watches over us with ever-loving care.

Does everybody have one yet? When you get one, I'd like you to take a look at it. Etched across the top are the words, "In God We Trust." These words were first placed on American coins around the time of the Civil War, another time when our country was in great turmoil. These words were put there to serve as a reminder

to everyone that no matter what happens, our hope is ultimately in God. How fitting that this should be on our money, the thing in which so many people place their ultimate trust!

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There was a book published earlier this year titled *Gross National Happiness*.<sup>2</sup> In this book, Arthur Brooks says that happiness has a lot to do with our values, and in fact, it's key to our prosperity as a nation. Based on his research, Mr. Brooks found that the #1 predictor of happiness in this country is faith. He says that, "In general, religious Americans [defined as (those who attend a place of worship almost every week or more)] are happier than those who rarely or never attend"... In a 2004 survey, "43 percent of religious folks said they were very happy with their lives, compared with 23 percent of secularists. Religious people were a third more likely than secularists to say they're optimistic about the future."

Rounding out Mr. Brooks top five predictors of happiness are, in this order: (2) Work; (3) Marriage and family; (4) Charity; and, (5) Freedom.<sup>3</sup>

Do you find it interesting that money didn't make it into that top 5 list? Somehow we tend to think that if we have more money we'll be more happy, but that's not what the survey results say. People of faith know what brings true happiness – it's our belief and trust in God.

So for the next week, I'd like you to carry this coin with you. Put it in your pocket so you'll have it handy and can touch it and be reminded often. In God We Trust. And no matter what happens in this world, rest assured that we who live in both the earthly realm *and* the kingdom of God have that ultimate assurance that comes only from knowing God. In this lies true happiness.

Amen.

<1,722 words>

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<sup>1</sup> Interpretation: Matthew by Douglas R.A. Hare (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 254.

<sup>2</sup> Gross National Happiness by Arthur C. Brooks (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> "Why We're Happy," by Arthur C. Brooks in Reader's Digest, July 2008, 163-169.