

Sermon Notes, October 22, 2017

Scripture: Matthew 22:15-22

All Readings for this Sunday http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp24_RCL.html



Matthew 22:15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 So 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."

Pharisees – These were Jews. They were openly hostile to the corrupting influence of Rome, especially how Roman influence corrupted the purity of Judaism. They were “true believers”. I will say this ad nauseam as you get to know me -Jesus was a good Pharisee, and fights with them like family.

Herodians- This was a Jewish group as well. They were a subset of “Hellenistic Jews”. This means they were Jews open to Greek culture. They were early adopters of the culture and customs of the day. They were considered hopelessly diluted and deluded by the Pharisees. They were not however, totally cool with Romans being in charge. They hoped that one day a Jewish child of Herod the Great would sit on the throne - independent of foreign influence. And, Herodians really liked “Herod the Great.”

'Herods' in the bible – It's confusing. **Herod the great**. He is not great, except that he was great at being terrible to people and great at holding onto his power. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that he tried to trick the wise men who visited baby Jesus. He also ordered the slaughter of toddlers in Chapter 2. There was **Herod the Tetrarch** who participated in Jesus' trial that would lead to the crucifixion and this Herod had John the Baptist beheaded. **Herod Agrippa I** was around when James was killed (after Jesus' death). Because this Herod did not praise God, he was eaten by worms. Finally, **Herod Agrippa II** dealt with the apostle Paul's legal red tape.

So what? This scene in Matthew 22 is a political marriage of convenience. It would be like the “feel the Bern” democrats teaming up with white-nationalists to thwart a senator's election. The thing that unites the Pharisees and Herodians is their shared disdain for Jesus and his popularity.

17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius.

Jeannine K. Brown, Professor of New Testament, Bethel Seminary, St. Paul, MN writes,

The tax is a census tax, a per person tax of a denarius (22:19). The conundrum for Jesus is this: If he answers yes (pay taxes), then he could be perceived as in collusion with Rome, justifying Roman occupation and oppression of the Jews. This would not be a popular answer among the Jewish people. On the other hand, if Jesus answers no (don't pay), he could be suspected of revolutionary sentiment against Rome.

With glee and malice team Pharisee/Herodian think they have set the perfect trap for Jesus in this question. But...

20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21 They 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." 22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

I am tempted to give a victory fist pump for Jesus, but more importantly, Jesus give us a way out of impossible traps.

Professor Brown continues - The beauty of Jesus' answer is that he both concedes payment of the census tax while subverting the reach of the emperor. If read one way, Jesus' answer is simply an affirmation of Christian submission to governing authorities. Yet if read from another angle, Jesus affirms the all-encompassing reach of God's ownership in a way that relativizes imperial claims of right to rule. The denarius which Jesus called his questioners to produce read "Tiberius Caesar, August Son of the Divine Augustus" on one side and "Pontifex Maximus" (high priest) on the other. Into the reverberation of such all-encompassing and even idolatrous claims, Jesus here reasserts God's ownership and rule.

If we see the world as Jesus does We don't have to 'do' anything except look to God. After this, we will have the strength to tear down the walls of injustice. Everything is under God's control and we should act accordingly. There is nothing that is powerful enough to subvert God's will - nothing beyond God's reach. Ironically, when we know that there is nothing we can do to “help God out,” then we get the strength to stand up against impossible situations, horrible tragedies, and human malice. The more we see God's sovereignty in the world, then the less we tolerate the systems that obstruct God's will. This is a mysterious way of living in the world.

I think this is the only way out of the activist/pietist trap. When we over-focus on prayer (piety) or on action only (activism) things get out of whack, but a life balanced in God breaks down false splits. The tightrope that Jesus invites us to walk creates an indestructible spirit of devotion and power no matter the circumstance. Don't think too hard, because this is a mystery.

Peace --Todd