

Right in the Middle
Matthew 22:15-22

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

There are three things that can rile people up. Three things that get people arguing and divided the most. Those three things are Religion, Politics and Money, and our Gospel reading has all three today. Now as a pastor I have a choice to make. I could preach on the first reading or the second reading and avoid this rock and a hard place situation that Jesus was confronted with in our reading today. But to really challenge our understanding and our knowledge of scripture, sometimes it is the best choice to grapple with the tougher texts. And even with the economy these days, the political situation of promises on taxing, benefits and programs, with the national election only a little over two weeks away, it seemed fitting to examine this Gospel reading.

First off we need to talk about religion. Jesus was preaching and teaching and healing and worshiping all in God's name. And that got people upset. Everywhere he went, religion went with him, it was who he was. In the marketplace, Christ preached. In the temples, Christ healed. In the countryside, Christ prayed. On the boats Christ taught. Everywhere he went and with everyone he met, Jesus was about his faith. And that didn't make everyone happy. Crowds of people started to seek him out. Just in the previous chapter (21) we heard that the crowds were cheering "Hosanna, Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord." They cheered him as the coming messiah as the triumphant king of old riding into Jerusalem, just like the Prophets had predicted. The people were stirred up, they were expecting a revival of their chosen race's power, but only in their way, not as Christ was about to do. And just like today people get upset, when faith issues go against what the society expects or wants.

That is what got the Jewish leaders so upset. This Jesus was teaching people new understandings, not what they wanted. Worse yet the crowds of people were listening to him. They saw their power slipping away. They saw the faithful turning away. They saw the numbers going down and their power getting weaker, so they knew they had to do something drastic and soon before it was too late.

One of the ways they decided to try to turn the people against Jesus was to embarrass him, trip him up, get him in one of those gotcha moments. Even today that tactic is still used. Look at the political races and debates, they candidates both are trying to get the other in that gotcha moment. Their campaigns are trained to seek out their opponents weaknesses and exploit it, to make them seem less knowledgeable, ill fit for office, or just the worst candidate

ever. Jesus likewise was a leader, so what better way to attack him then to embarrass him in front of the crowds. So they pose such a question in such a way that either way Jesus answers he is stuck. They ask is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not.

Any good faithful Jewish person worth his salt would obviously say NO. The Jewish people were taxed to excess they despised Roman rule and the tax levied on wine, olives, wheat, and any other livestock or produce. There was taxes on living, any man above age 14 had to pay a tax, if you were a woman above the age of 12 you had to pay a tax. They believed that God has given them this land and all that was in it, and to pay taxes was against that covenant with God. Now Caesar had come in with his own face on the coins and made the people bend to his ownership of their fields and of their crops. This taxation to most Jews was undesirable to say the least and to a few zealots it was a cause for rebellion, which just 40 years after this Gospel reading, the Jewish people tried to do against Rome. Any faithful Jew following the traditions of the patriarchs and the prophets would deplore any who gave this foreign ruler (who claimed himself as Lord) authority or respect. So as you can see this question is loaded with faith issues. If Jesus said Yes, it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor then the Jewish faithful would turn against him and turn away.

Ah but we also have the political side. We have the rock in the faith that says all the land and its produce belongs to the people of God and now we get the hard place in the Roman occupation. The text mentions the Herodians were there with the Pharisees. This is two distinct political opposites. The Herodians were members of the sympathizers with the family of Herod. These were the people who hold sold their faith way to the Romans so that they could be placed in as the rulers of Israel. Rome had seen fit to place a puppet king on the throne of Israel, someone that owed allegiance to them and they could control. The Herodians was this type of family. Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, Herod Agrippa, and all the Herods were only rulers over Israel in name because they had to do what ever Rome demanded. They had the power of Rome to back them against their own people. Faithful Jews didn't like them. They dreaded them, they hated this overbearing dictatorship and the taxes that they charged with the backing of the legions of Rome. They were there as the question is posed to see if Jesus answer NO, because if he did then he would be guilty of revolution, rebellion and incited possible riots of the people. If Jesus said that it is not lawful to pay taxes to the emperor the Herodians could have him arrested there on the spot.

So we have the religious faithful on one side that believe that Rome should have no right to the promised land of God's covenant. And we have the Political leaders on the other side

who believe and know that Rome is their source of power and strength. And right there in the middle is Jesus who turns to the third part of our lesson today – the Money.

Jesus knows right away they are out to get him. For one, these people come out with complements but you know they are saying it was false faces. They don't really mean the wonderful words they use. Jesus knows this right away, as he calls them hypocrites (two faced liars) who have come out to test him. He asks to see a coin used for the tax. And then he asks whose head is this, and whose title? Of course they say the emperors. Then he answers their questions right through the middle "give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's."

He smashes with a sledge hammer answer right out of that rock and a hard-place they thought they had him trapped in. Yes, you owe the emperor what it is the emperor's. Civil government is your responsibility to support. Government is needed to provide protection, roads, safety, etc. Because we use these systems then we should give back what is our due. So the political Herodians were appeased. But also we are to give to God what is God's and we know that everything that we have and are is the Lord's, then this little piece of metal can pass between people, from one pocket to another, one purse to another, and yet it is still through it all the Lord's and the Pharisees are appeased. Both sides are amazed at his answer

The religious and political folks wanted Jesus to decide one way or the other and that is exactly what he didn't do. He showed us that we live in both worlds. Our faith and our civil duties are bond together in one life. We can not separate our faith from our duties to family, country, business and relationships. We are to show our faith in all that we do. In fact, Paul today compliments the faithful of Thessalonica for the duty to faithfulness that has be spread to others by how they live their lives as imitators of Christ. We are to likewise be faithful people in all things. Yes even when we acquire, earn, invest, and spend money. And yes we are to be faithful people when we vote in a few weeks. And yes we are to be faithful in worship serving as God's stewards and evangelist in this church and beyond.

As Christians we live in the world, but not of the world. We stand in the middle. The world and its things that impact us, like taxes, bills, love, school, cars, houses, you name it they impact us. Then we have the power of God, that overcomes all things, that assures us of the eternal when all those taxes, bills, loves, schools, cars and houses come to an end, we are still with God. And so we live in the world and we are of God. May you this day know whose you are, as a child of God in this world may it impact you in all that you do and how you live here and now, assured of that promised kingdom yet to come.

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May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come. AMEN.