

This scene continues the disputes between Jesus and the powers that be that we have been following for the last few weeks. Again, the context is the temple area on the last Tuesday of Jesus' life before the crucifixion. The tension is palpable. You can feel it in the air. Things are about to explode.

Matthew 22:15-22

<sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.  
<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" <sup>18</sup> But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup> Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" <sup>21</sup> 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." <sup>22</sup> When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

This passage deals with politics, and as we know, according to the old saying, politics makes strange bedfellows. And that is the case here. Pharisees and Herodians, two significant forces, religious and political, collude to trap Jesus. Politically, the only thing that unites them is the desire to eliminate Jesus. But they have a jump on us even though they are not allies in anything else; they can come together for a common purpose. It is so disappointing that we have come to such a place where our politics are so divisive that, even with urgent items on the agenda, the powers that be can't agree to work for the common good. The only thing they agree on is that the other side is wrong.

In Jesus' day, the Pharisees wanted people to follow God's law and did not support Roman governance. The Herodians were Roman collaborators who owed their positions and wealth to Rome. The Herodians were an example of what happens when you let politics overshadow your religion and sell out your faith in God for prestige and privilege. But these two foes united to trap Jesus.

On the face of it, the trap was about the Roman Census tax, but the issue runs much deeper.

They approach Jesus together, starting with flattery, as if seeking an honest answer to a fundamental question. After buttering him up, the zinger comes. “So,” they say, “should people pay taxes to the emperor, that is Rome, or not?” This is the census tax and is required of everyone. For people scraping by, it was a double burden of faith and a burden placed on their ability to enjoy their daily bread. What does Jewish law say about this, they ask?

Jesus knows they are not interested in what he thinks except as it traps him. If he says yes, it is legal. He sides with the Herodians and, by extension, the Roman occupiers, whom most Jews see as foreign oppressors. This will put him in a bad standing with most people. And if he says, “No, don’t pay, for it is not legal,” then he will be in bad standing with the Roman authorities. He can be accused and tried for sedition. (Interestingly enough, that is what he is charged with when he is arrested and crucified at the end of this week.)

But trapping Jesus is more complicated than they realized. He sidesteps the trap they set; he recognizes it as a trap and calls them hypocrites. He asks, “Why are you tempting me?” This is a loaded question. As we remember that when Jesus began his ministry, he was driven out into the wilderness to be tested by Satan. So, Matthew wants us to know nothing is innocent in their loaded question. Instead, it is another test by Satan.

In response, Jesus simply asks, “Show me the coin that the tax is paid with.” If you remember, Jesus had just caused a scene the day before by driving out the sellers of animals and knocking over the moneychangers' tables. And so, coins are a big issue. The amount of the tax payable to Rome is a denarian, the equivalent of a hard-earned day’s wage. On the obverse or head’s side of the coin is the image and title of Tiberius Caesar, with the inscription “Son of the Divine Augustus”. And on the tail or reverse side, it says “Pontifex Maximus”, which is High Priest.

So, in the temple area, the opponents produce this coin. Notice Jesus doesn’t have one. Of course, he doesn’t have one, especially in the temple area, for the possession of such a coin is a violation of the first and second commandments, which celebrate the deliverance from Egyptian slavery and command to have no other God and to make no images of God. So even before Jesus speaks the punch

line, they have convicted themselves, for they all must know the coin violates God's law.

Almost as an understatement, Jesus asks the critical question, "Whose image is on the coin?" "The Emperor," they reply, and it is not clear that they get what has just happened. They are caught with a coin in the temple area with the Emperor's image on it, and thus, their own words have convicted them of the hypocrisy Jesus accused them of. The coin claims that Caesar is divine. Not an instrument of the divine, but divine. They have this coin, they know what it says, and they should know it violates the commandments.

"Well," Jesus continues, "give to the emperor what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's." (By the way, we know everything belongs to God.) I don't think they get it, but they have just attacked the person of the emperor, for if God is Lord and Divine, Caesar is not, which might have angered the Herodians even more. Even though they go away amazed, the movement to the cross continues and begins to accelerate. I can almost hear them grumbling, "This man has to go!"

So, throughout the time since then, the question of what belongs to God and what to Caesar is still open. One extreme is the separation into two realms, Spiritual and Political, which often is reflected in the separation of church and State. By the way, is not biblical, nor is it what the doctrine is all about. The separation of church and state ensures freedom of worship from state control. It was never intended to keep our faith out of the political arena. The other extreme is the complete blending of the two, often with politics determining one's understanding of one's faith. This is where faith is viewed through the lens of partisan politics.

Neither is what I think Jesus had in mind. I think he was being faithful to his Torah. His bible. We are supposed to remember Genesis 1:26, which declares we are all created in God's image and everything in God's image belongs to God. Because we are in God's image and we belong to God, we are to give ourselves to God, who will never forsake us, and we can trust the Lord will keep faith with us, unlike too many in the messy world of politics.

In 1983, when the northern and southern Presbyterian churches reunited, a new Brief Statement of Faith was produced, which I think captures what Jesus is saying:

In life and in death, we belong to God.  
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,  
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,  
whom alone we worship and serve.

We belong to God totally. It doesn't mean we forsake politics, but that we view them through faith. We belong to God while we live in the messy world of politics, where we are supposed to ask, "What would Jesus have us do?"

But even if it is messy, we can't avoid it, nor should we try. We are called to live in God's world, not withdraw from it. So, as people of faith, we live in a world of politics and faith. I firmly believe that our faith in Jesus should determine our politics. So, humility, sacrificial love, integrity, and the desire to love our neighbor are prime ingredients in our politics.

Having said this, we can't be naïve. We live in a fallen world where evil abounds, and that evil must be resisted by people of faith. As much as we hate war and violence, they are part of our reality. Witness the violence and evil in Ukraine and Gaza. Resistance to this evil is necessary but must be undertaken somberly and regretfully.

So, all belongs to God, even our politics. When I was first interviewed here, a member of the session asked, "You aren't going to preach politics, are you?" And I said, "Yes. For politics is given to us by God as the way we order life. But," I continued, "I will do my best not to preach partisan politics." I am convinced no party has primary allegiance to God, nor do they harmonize their policies with God's. Some policies we can support, and some we must oppose no matter the party.

*So, faith and politics do mix, but the mixture must be handled with care, discernment, and wisdom. Here is how not to handle it.*

*I have a friend who failed to recognize that. The first week he was at his new church, he insisted that the United States flag be moved out of the sanctuary. I*

*disagree with him, but I know where he comes from. In scripture, objects of nationalism were often placed in Israel's temple by occupying powers as a sign of disrespect and a reminder of their domination, and people protested and gave their lives to try to remove these sacrileges.*

*My friend made two mistakes. The first, I think he was wrong about our flag. It is not a symbol of domination. It reminds us that Christians in the United States are called on to love and pray for our country. While the cross is our primary symbol of who we are, Jesus' family, our flag also represents where and who we are. We are Jesus' people in the United States, and we are called to pray for our country and its leaders.*

*When I was president of our neighborhood association in St. Louis, I had us start each meeting with the pledge of allegiance, which I believe is very proper for a civic association. And I like to sing patriotic hymns on National Holidays. And I miss Father Greg leading us in "Let There Be Peace on Earth" to conclude the National Day of Prayer Service in the park and other gatherings in our community as we gathered there to pray for our nation*

*My friend's second mistake, and maybe even more significant, was not realizing what a hot-button issue moving the flag would be, especially on his first Sunday. His people did not have the opportunity to come to know him and develop a relationship. I don't think it would have changed their belief that the flag belongs in the sanctuary, but they could communicate with each other with love and respect. He tried to be political according to his light without developing a context of love and trust. He didn't listen and share. These acts are essential when faith and politics intersect. As a result, his ministry was doomed from that moment on and never recovered from that. How could it? So, he was soon moving on. I hope he learned, but I am not sure.*

*He showed neither care nor wisdom, which is sometimes hard to do but is required when our faith and political beliefs are called into question. I will admit it is hard to live out our faith in the arena of politics, but there is no choice. Politics is how society is structured and governed. In the political arena, there is the ability to tax, make laws, and wage wars. Communities of faith don't have that. We have the power to love, serve, and inspire. We can't legislate love, but we can work for justice.*

There is an old saying that justice is what love looks like when it is put into action in everyday life. As citizens who belong to God, we are called to work for justice. If we believe the system is unjust, we are summoned to work to change it so that all might enjoy God's blessings. To do this, we are called into the arena of politics guided by our faith.

Justice is sometimes hard to determine and requires wisdom and courage from people of faith and those who lead in the political realm. We must learn that there are people of good conscience who disagree with us. Something that is so needed today. And we must never forget that those who differ from us in outlook are also in God's image; they, too, belong to God. It is essential to listen with respect and seek to understand what they are saying and why. We still may disagree, but we can still hold that they are in God's image. And treat them as such because in life and death, we all belong to God.

If we want to see a better world, as the song reminds us, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." We can't just walk away grumbling like the Pharisees and the Herodians. We must engage with each other and the system in a spirit of mutual love and understanding.

Our Christian politics begin with the confession that in life and death, we all belong to God. It is made concrete as it is acted with love and understanding in our messy world of politics.