



Lectionary 29, Year A

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21st Sunday after Pentecost: Gospel Text - Matthew 22:15-22

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵ The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] 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. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar 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. ²⁰ Then he said to them, "Whose head is this and whose title?" ²¹ They answered, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar'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.

SERMON TEXT:

There is something about wet cement that human beings apparently cannot resist. Give us a perfectly smooth patch of freshly poured concrete, and immediately somebody wants to put something in it. A handprint. A footprint. Initials. A name. A date.

Sometimes people are invited to do it. A family pours a patio and presses the kids' hands into one corner. Maybe the dog gets a paw print too. Other times, someone happens upon a sidewalk that hasn't quite dried yet and thinks, "You know what this needs? My initials."

Years later, you can walk past that same sidewalk and find somebody's name scratched into it. You have no idea who they were or what happened to them. But there is their mark: I was here.

Human beings have been doing some version of this for thousands of years. We carve our initials into trees and scratch our names into desks. We paint murals on buildings, quilt

patterns on barns, and street art across city walls. We even mark our own bodies with tattoos that tell stories about who we are, what we love, and what we want to remember. We leave our mark.

And I wonder if underneath all of it is something deeply human. We want to know that our lives matter. We want to be known. We want to be remembered. We want to leave something behind that says: I was here. My life mattered. I made a difference.

That longing isn't necessarily a bad thing. In our best moments, our desire to leave a mark has created masterpieces of art and music. It has pushed us to innovate and invent, to build hospitals and schools, to plant gardens, write books, and start movements that have changed communities for the better. At its best, the desire to leave a mark becomes a desire to leave something good behind, to use the life God has given us to make life more abundant for someone else.

But that same longing can also turn inward. The desire to matter becomes the need to be important. The desire to contribute

becomes the need to be recognized. The desire to leave something behind becomes the need to make sure our name is attached to it. When our worth depends on being noticed, remembered, or powerful, we can become so consumed with securing our own place that we diminish the place of others.

Maybe that is where the desire to leave a mark becomes dangerous: when our mark stops saying, "I was here," and starts saying, "I am in charge. This belongs to me."

And that brings us to Caesar.

In today's Gospel, the Pharisees and Herodians come to Jesus with a question. They begin with empty flattery, setting him up for the trick question that follows. Then they introduce one of the hottest issues of the day: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?

For decades, the Jewish people had been required to pay this tax to Rome, a painful reminder that they were living under Roman occupation. To add insult to injury, the tax was paid with a Roman denarius, roughly a day's wage for a laborer. The coin itself bore

the image of Emperor Tiberius and an inscription identifying him as "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus." On the reverse was another imperial title: *pontifex maximus*, chief priest.

So it wasn't simply that Rome demanded their money. Even the coin used to pay the tax proclaimed Caesar's power. Every payment required them to handle a little piece of imperial propaganda bearing Caesar's face, Caesar's name, and Caesar's claims to authority. The tax took their money. The coin reminded them who was in charge.

Caesar had quite literally left his mark. His face. His name. His titles. And that mark carried a message far more forceful than somebody's initials scratched into wet cement: I am here. I am in charge. This belongs to me.

Caesar's economy traded in coin and conquest, power and position, domination and debt. It measured greatness by what you possessed, whom you controlled, and how much of the world bore your name.

That is what makes the Pharisees' and Herodians' question so dangerous. Raising the question of paying taxes to the emperor was like tossing a lit match into a room full of gasoline. There was almost no way for Jesus to answer without getting burned. If he says yes, he risks alienating people who resent Roman occupation. If he says no, he puts himself in direct opposition to Rome, making it much easier for the authorities to label him a threat. Either answer gives them something to use against him. It is a carefully crafted trap.

And Jesus knows it.

So Jesus asks them to show him the coin used to pay the tax. And they produce a denarius.

The fact that they can produce the coin is revealing. It shows just how deeply they are entangled in Caesar's economy. Willingly or unwillingly, they are already participating in the very system they are questioning Jesus about. Caesar's coin is already in their pockets. And, in a very real sense, they are already in Caesar's pocket.

Jesus takes the coin and asks, "Whose image is this? And whose title?"

"Caesar's," they reply.

And Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's."

But I think there is more happening here than Jesus simply dividing life into neat categories of government and religion. Jesus is holding up more than a coin. He is holding up a symbol of Caesar's way of exercising power.

The coin bears Caesar's image. His face. His name. His titles. And behind that image stands an empire built on conquest and control, domination and submission, power and prestige.

So when Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," I hear something more challenging than instructions about paying taxes. Give that way of being back to Caesar.

Give to Caesar the endless pursuit of power. Give to Caesar the need to dominate in order to matter. Give to Caesar the need to possess in order to feel powerful. Give to Caesar the monuments and titles and all those attempts to convince the world that his power will last forever.

Let Caesar have Caesar's way of power. It bears his image.

And that challenge did not end with Tiberius. Every generation has its Caesars. Every generation encounters people and systems that promise greatness through domination, security through control, and permanence through power. And in every generation, our lives become uncomfortably entangled with those systems. Sometimes we choose to participate. Sometimes we benefit from them. Sometimes we have little choice but to live within them. Caesar's coins still have a way of ending up in our pockets.

That is what makes Jesus' challenge so unsettling. The question is not simply whether Caesar exists somewhere out there. The question is how Caesar's economy has found its way into our

lives, into what we value, what we pursue, how we measure success, and where we place our trust.

Jesus holds up the coin and exposes that pursuit for what it is.

And then he offers another way.

"Give to God what is God's."

Because God has left an image too. But God does not stamp God's image on coins or monuments. God places God's image on flesh, on blood and bone, on us. From the beginning, God creates humankind in God's own image and places us within an interconnected web of life, entrusting us with its care and calling the whole of creation "very good."

And in baptism, God's claim on us becomes beautifully tangible. Water is poured. God's name is spoken. We are marked with the cross of Christ forever, not because we get everything right, not because we have earned it, but because God loves us. And God calls us again and again to embody that same love in the world.

God's economy measures greatness differently. Caesar seeks greatness through domination; God reveals greatness through self-giving love. Caesar seeks security through control; God creates abundant life through relationship, generosity, and care. Caesar seeks permanence by stamping his image on everything he can possess; God places God's image not on things, but on people. And in Jesus, we see just how far that love will go. Jesus does not grasp for power or control. He gives himself away, offering his love, his mercy, his forgiveness, and ultimately his very life.

Caesar's economy asks, "How much can I possess?" God's economy asks, "How much life can I give?"

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Jesus is making a claim about who ultimately has a claim on us.

And in a world like ours, it is easy to forget who we belong to. It is easy to be lulled into believing that we have to fight for our place,

prove our worth, secure our own power, and somehow make sure our lives matter. But God has already marked us for something different. Something better. Something more life-giving.

Every night when I tuck my children into bed, I make the sign of the cross on their foreheads and remind them, "You are a beloved child of God, and nothing will ever change that." I have done it since they were tiny. They are teenagers now, taller than me, and I still every night I make my way to their rooms and mark a cross on their foreheads.

Because that little cross is a claim on their lives. It is my prayer that wherever this life takes them, they will rest in the peace of knowing who they ultimately belong to. And maybe it is also a quiet act of resistance, a reminder that they do not belong to Caesar or to any of Caesar's modern imitators. They do not belong to the voices that measure their worth by what they accomplish, what they possess, how much influence they have, or whether the world remembers their names.

God remembers their names!

They bear another image. They belong to another kingdom.

Their lives have been marked by the God of life. And God will call them again and again to use those lives not to grasp for power, but to give life. To love. To serve. To create. To forgive. To seek justice. To care for their neighbors.

And the same is true for you.

You bear another image. You belong to another kingdom.

The good news is that we do not have to spend our lives trying to prove that we were here. We do not have to build monuments to ourselves or fight to make our names last forever. We are free to stop worrying so much about the mark we will leave behind and start living from the mark God has already placed upon us.

And so, my dear friends in Christ, give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's.

Because you bear God's image.

You are marked with the cross of Christ.

And you belong to God.

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