

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I just paid my taxes this past week for 2019. Actually, it's not exactly true that I *paid* my taxes. What I did was finally *file* my taxes for 2019. The way it works, as you probably know, is that you had to have paid your taxes back on April 15, or maybe it was extended to July 15 this year because of the pandemic. So I paid what I thought I owed and then I work with my accountant and finally got things filed for the extended extension deadline this past Thursday. My federal estimates were good, but it turns out that I owed the State of Illinois a nice chunk of change. So I did pay that this past week, along with the penalty and interest. Now it just so happens that I'm not opposed to paying taxes, because I recognize that my taxes pay for all kinds of important things that we collectively fund as a society. But whether I'm opposed to paying taxes or not, I am compelled to pay them. I don't really have a choice – or at least not a choice that would be preferable to paying them. As a resident of Illinois, and as a resident of the United States, I am obligated to pay taxes on my income. And so in that very limited sense, you could say that they own me, the state and federal government. I belong to them.

The situation for Jesus and his people in today's Gospel reading is something like mine, but actually much, much worse. The taxes that are mentioned here are paid to a foreign occupier, the Roman Empire. And as was the practice at that time, the money in circulation bore the image of the current emperor. And so every time the people of Israel people engaged in commerce beyond their own circles, and every time they were required to pay a tax, the money itself bore a painful reminder that they were occupied and oppressed, that Rome, in a sense, owned them.

That's the background for these Pharisees coming to Jesus in the temple this morning, and bringing with them the herodians. Scholars aren't sure who these herodians are, but it seems they were connected with the descendants of Herod the Great who were the local Jewish agents of Roman rule. So, collaborators. And they are out to get Jesus. Jesus has been teaching in the temple, telling parables against the religious establishment, and even taking direct action against them. In the previous chapter of Matthew, Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers and drove them out of the temple courtyard.

Let's remember what that was about, because it helps to explain our text this morning. Roman coins were idolatrous from the Jewish point of view. Not only did they have that graven image on them, which was forbidden by God, but written around the image on these coins was an inscription that claimed the emperor to be the son of God! Let's also remember that the main activity of the temple was the sacrificing of animals to God. But by this time a lot of the Jewish people were no longer agricultural, or they had to travel a long way to the temple, so bringing their own animals to sacrifice was problematic. Where there's a problem, there's usually a solution, and the solution in this case was to sell sacrificial animals in the temple courtyard. But, since the Roman currency was religiously offensive, a temple coin was created for use within the temple which was exchanged when you came into the temple. That had been turned into something of a racket, and that's why Jesus got disruptive in the previous chapter.

So here we are in the temple – past the money changers station, which probably had resumed business as usual because this was the next day – and that's where the Pharisees and Herodians try to trap Jesus. They ask him a question that they don't think he'll be able to answer without offending someone. Is it lawful to pay taxes? If he says yes, he will make his own people angry for supporting the Roman occupation. If he says no, he'll make the Romans and their

Herodian agents angry for being subversive of their rule. It's a no-win situation for Jesus, or so they think. But Jesus has a trap for them. "Show me the coin for the tax." And they fall for it. But Jesus' trap is not like theirs. He does not try to create a no-win situation for them. They could have said that they didn't *have* a Roman coin with them since they were in the temple. And that would have been an especially good answer if it were true. But instead they expose their own hypocrisy by bringing him the coin.

More than that, they expose their true loyalties. By fishing a Roman coin from their pockets on the temple grounds, they show themselves to be in the pockets of the Roman occupiers. When push comes to shove, their bets are on the Roman powers that be, not on God, who has been slow to deliver them from their misery.

And what about us? How would we do with Jesus challenge if we could translate the very foreign situation in our Gospel reading into our own time and culture? Would we, too, show that we trust more in the power of the state, more in our economy and our economic system, more in tribalism and power politics, than we trust in God? – even though that's written on some of our currency? Is that the symbol of our own hypocrisy, that we write "In God We Trust" on our money, when really, we trust much more in money than we do in God? I'll let you wrestle with that and with your own loyalties, but I'll share a personal example. I mentioned paying my taxes when I started my sermon. Decide for yourself what this says about me: I pay a lot more in taxes to the state and federal government than I give in my regular offering to the church. In fact, I pay more in taxes than all of my charitable giving combined. And I don't think that I'm alone in that, or even in the minority. Money, of course, is not the only gauge of my loyalties. How I spend my time and my thoughts and energy say something too. But I think we all know that money is a big indicator. And since this is stewardship season, and you'll be hearing some temple talks from our newly revived stewardship committee soon, I'll commend to your attention the brief treasurer's reports we've been running in the GraceNotes and the significant deficit we're currently running.

But Jesus makes this about more than money. And that's clearer in the Greek and other English translations than it is in the NRSV. The word "head" in Jesus' question about the coin is really "image." Whose image does the coin bear? Caesar's. It's his coin. He runs the economy that you participate in. Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. But also, give to God what belongs to God. Jesus is being subtle here, but everyone in Matthew's audience would have gotten what he is hinting at. Just as coins bear the image of the powers that be, so we human beings bear the image of THE power that is. Genesis 1:27 says this: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

If our misplaced loyalties are the bad news of today's reading, the good news is God's persistent loyalty to us, the joyous affirmation that we who bear the image of God continue to be lovingly claimed by God as God's own: you, me, every person you encounter in your daily life, and every person that you don't. And those of us who are baptized into Christ Jesus additionally bear the image of his death and resurrection. Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we bear the image of God's commitment to us that is stronger even than death and taxes. And we are called and invited into the self-giving love that Jesus embodies in his life, death, and resurrection, love for God and for the world upon which God has stamped God's image, love that is the essence of life itself. May we be compelled by that invitation and strengthened by our trust in Jesus' promise of life. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.