

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I want us to spend a moment this morning, each of us, to consider how we are spending our lives. It's a funny expression, if you think about it – the idea of “spending” your life. I wonder if you've ever thought about that before. There are two things we spend, one is time and the other is money. And of course economists and business people like to remind us that time is money, and it doesn't take much to be convinced of that, especially where business productivity is concerned. If you are paying a person to do a certain amount of work and they can get the work done much more quickly than you anticipated, well, you can get them going on some more work, and you will have made a little more money from them than you planned. If they work more slowly than anticipated, well they might not get to the next project you have for them when you need them, and your business will have lost money in that arrangement.

So the question about how you are spending your life imagines first of all that your life is yours to control as you wish, which is at least partly true for the people in this room who made the decision to get up and showered and over to church this morning, or those of you online who may or may not be showered yet, but who decided to join the livestream, or to tune into the recording later on. So yes, you have some control over that if you're not a kid. And if things go badly this morning, you might be aware of another way in which you have “spent” an hour of your life – you might mutter under your breath, or to your spouse, “well *there's* an hour of my life I'm never getting back!” That's of course just as true when we enjoy the time as when we don't, but we seem only to notice it when we wish we had used what control we do have differently. I suppose the same is true for money. When you have spent your money well, when you have gotten good value out of a monetary transaction, then you don't mind the expense. But when you haven't, you have wasted your money, and you feel angry or embarrassed. So, with all of this in mind, I ask again, how are you spending your life, and how do you feel that spending is going?

Okay, now I want you to put a pin in that thought, as they say, and we'll come back to it after having a look at a different question in our Gospel reading this morning. Or is it a different question after all? I ask that again in a few minutes. The spending question that is put to Jesus in this reading today is about taxes, and whether it is lawful to pay them. Not whether it's legal, but whether it is a right and proper thing to do in the worldview of Jesus' people. But Matthew lets us know that this is a trap. The Pharisees, who have been the target of Jesus' recent parables, are the ones setting the trap, and they have arranged for two different groups to be present for this question, both of them already opposed to Jesus because of his threat to their way of life. They're playing the “enemy of my enemy is my friend” game, but they make for very strange bedfellows. One group is the Herodians, the Jewish collaborators with the Roman empire who get to be the local power as long as they play nice with the Romans. And among other things that means helping them to collect taxes. So if Jesus says anything against paying taxes, he will be exposed as rebel against Roman rule. The other group is the Pharisees themselves, the strictest, most pious, most observant practitioners of the Jewish faith. If Jesus says anything *positive* about paying taxes he will be exposed as rejecting the sovereignty of God and so a false prophet. It's damned if you do, damned if you don't for Jesus.

Jesus sees the trap, and he's not going to touch that cheese by answering yes or no. Instead, he sets a trap of his own. To appreciate this trap we need to remind ourselves of where this action is taking place and also what Jesus has just done in the previous chapter. This is taking place on the temple grounds where Jesus has just turned over the tables of the money changers the day before and chased them out of the temple. The money changers were providing a service to people coming to offer sacrifices in the temple. People needed to buy the animals for the sacrifices, but they couldn't

do so with the usual currency, Roman coins, because Roman coins had the image of the emperor on them, and in Jewish piety, graven images of people and animals were strictly forbidden. What the money changers did was change Roman coins into temple coins without the offending images, and those coins were used to buy the sacrificial animals. Okay, that's the setup to understanding Jesus' trap. His opponents have come to him with a pretext of sincerity toward Jesus and piety toward God (since, of course, they are in the temple.) But when Jesus asks to see the coin used to pay the tax, that's when *his* trap is set. And when one of the opponents brings out the coin, the cheese is touched, and the trap is sprung. They are caught in their hypocrisy by having idolatrous coins in their possession in God's temple. Jesus broadcasts the faux pas. "Whose image is this? And whose title?" he asks. They are forced to admit their transgression to anyone within earshot.

But Jesus isn't done. This isn't just a "gotcha" moment that so much of our polarizing culture is too often satisfied with. Here in the place where sacrificial offerings are made to God, Jesus says, "Give to the emperor what is the emperor's, and to God what is God's." The coin bears the emperor's image. It's his coin, his economic system that they are imbedded in. But what is God's? What bears God's image? It goes unspoken here, but everyone gathered around Jesus here, and everyone originally hearing Matthew's Gospel, knew what Genesis 1:27 says: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." What bears the image of God? Human beings do! God's image is stamped in to us. So we are God's coins, God's money. And what do you do with money? You use it; you spend it.

Our first reading is a kind of example of that. It's addressed to Cyrus, the Persian king, who conquered the Babylonian empire who had conquered Jerusalem and Judea, and so ended the Babylonian exile of God's people. In this reading God is saying to Cyrus, "you are mine. You belong to me. I use you as I please." I'm sure that if Cyrus ever heard this message, which I expect he didn't, that he would have been enraged at such a bold claim from a foreign god. Not only did God claim Cyrus as his own, but God is also claiming here to create Cyrus' gods, the god of light and the god of darkness. They too are my creatures. I made them.

That's a power play. It's polemical and politically subversive. And we could be tempted to apply it to ourselves. We belong to God to use as God pleases. *We* do not spend our lives, God spends us as God chooses. We should just accept our fate.

But don't go there, dear people, because something else is happening in Jesus. The book of Colossians says this about Jesus. "He is the image of the invisible God ... all things have been created through him and for him ... In him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell." Jesus *is* the image of God in all its fulness. Jesus is God's prototypical and ultimate coin. And in Jesus' incarnation, life, and crucifixion God spends this coin in its entirety for us and for our salvation. God is like the widow in the temple giving her very last coins, all she had. But God is not only a spender, and a lavish spender at that. God is also a saver. Through Jesus' resurrection the coin that was spent is saved, and becomes the die that is used to stamp new coins. In Holy Baptism, we who were already God's coins, bearing the image of God from birth, are now reminted as new coins bearing the image of God in Christ. But we are an unusual kind of coin in that we participate in our own spending. Like Jesus, who the night of his betrayal, prayed to God "not my will but yours be done," so we utter the same prayer throughout our lives as we live out of the promise of our baptism and are continually refined by God's love and forgiveness.

So the question I began with, "how are you spending your life?" does indeed become, "how is God spending your life, you who have been reminted in the image of his beloved son? And how are you participating in that spending by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit?" Ponder this new question in your hearts this week, and rejoice that you bear the image of God in Christ. Rejoice in your spending and in your saving. And rejoice in the peace of God which passes all understanding, and which will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.