

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

Take a moment to consider how you are spending your life, how you have spent it so far, how you plan to spend the rest of it. It's a funny expression, if you think about it – the idea of “spending” your life. There are two things I can think of that we spend, time and money. We also expend energy, and we used to say that we were “spent” when we were really tired. I don't think anyone says that any more. So time and money are what we spend, and economists and business people will remind us that time *is* money.

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 it, 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, let's to put a pin in that thought, 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 a rebel against Rome. The other group they send are their own disciples, those learning to be Pharisees, 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 a damned if you do, damned if you don't sort of a trap.

Jesus sees the trap, and he's not going to eat 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. This is taking place on the temple grounds where Jesus has been teaching. 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 bring out the coin, the cheese is eaten, 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 head is this? And whose title?” he asks. Our

translation hides something important here. Jesus actually asks, “whose *image* is this?” – whose image and whose inscription. The image, of course, is Caesar’s. And the inscription likely read, “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus.” So, not only did the coin bear a forbidden image, it also bore the claim that he was the son of a god.

But Jesus isn’t done. This isn’t just one of those “gotcha” moments that our polarized culture has come to love. 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, and his economic system that they are embedded in. And they are reminded of that every day as they receive their daily wage. But what is God’s? What bears God’s image? It goes unspoken here, but everyone gathered around Jesus here, and everyone in Matthew’s community, knew that Genesis 1:27 says that “God created humans in [God’s] image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” What bears the image of God? We human beings do! God’s image is stamped into us. So we are God’s coins, God’s money. And what do you do with money? 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 and ended the exile of God’s people. In this reading God is saying to Cyrus, “you are mine, my coin. I spend you as I please.” Now, I’d guess that if Cyrus ever heard this message he would have been enraged at such a bold claim from what he would have regarded as the loser god of a loser people. As many of you are aware, Cyrus has been used by some of our fellow Christians to justify electing a president who is not the devout Christian that they had always insisted on. Since he didn’t fit that mold, he must be a Cyrus – someone who does not know God, but whom God can use anyway. Here’s the thing. They could be right. God could be using the powers that be to bring down an oppressive empire. But a lot hinges on who is the oppressor and who is the oppressed, and I will let you come to your own conclusions on that.

In our Isaiah passage, God calls Cyrus “my anointed.” The kings of Israel were anointed by God. But there is someone else who is called “the anointed.” The Greek word for it is Christ. And the book of Colossians says this about Jesus the Christ. “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. But God is not only a spender. 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, who is Jesus Christ. And we also bear a new title, “child of God.” And we do not belong to any one nation, but are spent throughout the world, in every nation. 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, and the title “Child of God.” Rejoice in your spending and in your saving. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.