

Proper 24A – SJ – What is Caesar’s?

Matthew 22:15-22 10/16/11

St. John’s Episcopal Church, Salisbury, CT

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If you’re from my era, you may remember a popular television program from those days named *What’s My Line?* It ran from 1950 until 1967 in its very long run as a prime-time show. If you’re too young to remember it, let me set the scene for you. Four pretty well known panelists would typically, through questions that could be answered only by a “yes” or a “no,” attempt, before accumulating 10 “no” answers, to ascertain what a visitor’s occupation was – or, in the case of a famous “mystery guest,” who that person was. When one of the visitors revealed that his occupation was to manufacture a product, Steve Allen, who was a guest panelist, asked a question that was to become infamous over the years: “Is it bigger than a breadbox?” Which led, naturally, inevitably, to a future contestant whose occupation was making breadboxes.

Well, once upon a time, way in my past, I had a job that I thought would have been a perfect “What’s My Line” kind of job. **Although** – actually, perhaps more likely **because** – I had previously been a navy officer for four years, I had a position during the Vietnam War as Coordinator for Selective Service Affairs for the – at that time – 10-campus University of California. I was responsible for two different things. One was ensuring that all of the students at the various campuses had their student status reported accurately to their various draft boards – and, until the introduction of the draft lottery system, any status as graduate students that had them working at positions that qualified them for deferments because they were working in laboratories on projects considered important to national defense or security efforts.

My other responsibility, because many students were getting both inaccurate and biased information on the street, was to ensure the accuracy of the information and counseling they received from university employees about the way the draft system functioned, what might qualify them for deferments and, perhaps most especially, what might persuade their draft boards that they were legitimately conscientious objectors to war. That latter responsibility made me sort of the draft counselor in charge – which required an ability to walk the fine line between what belongs to the emperor, and what to God, that Jesus draws in his famous illustration in this morning’s gospel.

Two groups are together to question Jesus: the Pharisees, who resent the way he ignores a strict observance of the law yet seems always to be surrounded by crowds of admirers, and the Herodians – that is, the Jewish faction most closely associated with the ruling faction of their occupied country, with its puppet king, Herod. This group is concerned that Jesus might stir up his followers to some sort of rebellion,

and thereby provoke the Romans to retaliate against the Jewish people. The Pharisees and Herodians unite to try to entrap Jesus into making a statement that will alienate one faction of the common folks or another. First, they start with a bit of obviously insincere flattery: “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth....” They are certainly insincere in the way they flatter him, but, of course, the words are, ironically, perfectly true!

Then they ask him whether it is right to pay taxes to their Roman oppressors or not. It’s a Catch 22 kind of question, though, isn’t it? If he says “yes,” what kind of Jew is he? If he tells people to give money to the Romans, can he really be teaching the way of God? On the other hand, if he counsels against paying the tax, he can be accused of fostering sedition. In fact, though this passage clearly shows that the charge of sedition is *not* true, since he does counsel that they should give money to the emperor, when Jesus is hauled before Pilate that’s one of the accusations actually brought against him.

Now what exactly was this tax that he is being asked about? A Jew in this period was subject to several different taxes. But this tax was particularly significant, and odious, because it was specifically to support the needs of the Roman occupiers – you may recall that they were great builders of aqueducts and roads, for example – and then, of course, there was the administration of Pilate himself to support – and even the presence of the occupying army. The amount collected for this purpose was actually pretty modest by the standards of our own society, in which we work from January until sometime in May to pay our own taxes, but at least we have some say in how it they’re spent. The Jews did not. The amount they had to pay was the typical daily wage for the average worker in that society - the value of a silver coin known as a denarius. And though the amount was not great, there was something especially obnoxious about giving one of these coins to the Romans – or even, for that matter, having to use them at all. The mere possession of these coins offended many Jews.

Why is that? Well, remember those two stone tablets that Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai? “You shall have no other gods before me,” God said. And there was also that injunction against making what the King James Bible called “graven images.” That commandment led to a rejection of representational art among the Hebrews – and actually, years later, among many early Protestants as well. The reason the coin, the denarius, was offensive was that on its face was the image – in Greek the word is “icon” – of the emperor – called by the Romans “Caesar” in honor of Julius Caesar. In Jesus’ time that emperor was Tiberius, and, along with an image of his face, the coin, in English translation, read “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus.” Use one of these? If you were a truly observant Jew, you wouldn’t even want to have one in your pocket. And, pretty obviously Jesus does not, since to make his point he has to ask if one of his questioners can give him one – and, of course, one of them does give a denarius to him.

Now, holding the coin up to show what is on it, Jesus makes his famous declaration that folks should give to the emperor, Caesar, what belongs to him, but to God what belongs to God. Doesn't that question, though, really **beg** the question? Doesn't it require his questioners – and us – to figure out for ourselves how to differentiate what ought to go to each. If you look once again at the Hebrew scriptures – indeed, all the way back to the Book of Genesis – you will find that God created humans in God's own image. In the Greek translation of those scriptures – which is what first-century Jews would have been using, image is once again a translation of the word "icon." And in the words of our liturgy we are to give ourselves – our souls and bodies – all of us – to God because we are made in **his** image.

By reminding us that what we must give to God must be a consequence of the fact that we are made in **God's** image, not that of the emperor, Jesus sets the bar very high indeed, but he doesn't thereby tell us that we should not give anything to our governments – or how much we **should** give. We still have to figure that out for ourselves. Pretty obviously he was not counseling his listeners not to give anything to the Romans. That **would** have constituted sedition, and he is, after all, also the same person who healed the centurion's child and told his followers to carry a Roman soldier's pack an extra mile. But – and this is important not only for those to whom he is speaking directly, but also for us today – he is clearly **not** suggesting an equal division either. We owe God **all** of us; so, although we are surely going to give something to the government, since obviously – if we want to stay out of trouble we need to pay our own taxes – whatever we do give we should do all in our power to see spent as **God** would want it spent – for ultimately everything we do – indeed, everything we are – belongs to God.

AMEN