

What Counts Above All Else?

October 18, 2020

UMC Geneva IL

In today's reading from Matthew's story of Jesus, we enter a world of escalating tension and conflict between Jesus and various Jewish groups of his day. Jesus, by the way, has just entered Jerusalem to the adulation of the crowds, but things quickly turn sour as he enters the Temple precinct, overthrows the money-changers' tables, and engages in a series of confrontations.

The first is with the Herodians and the Pharisees. It's amazing that these folks even got together as they were as polarized as any Republican or Democrat in Congress today. The Herodians – supporters of Herod's extended family of Jewish puppet kings - actively supported Rome's colonial rule of Israel in the backwater province of Palestine. Through this unholy alliance with Rome, the Herodians amassed great power and wealth at the cruel expense of the vast majority of Jews in Palestine who were peasants.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, aligned themselves politically with the peasants and many nationalists in opposition to Roman rule. But, the Pharisees did so primarily on *religious grounds* – they had to pay taxes to Rome with a coin engraved with an image of Caesar Tiberius on one side and the inscription of Caesar's divinity on the other. Paying taxes to Rome with this coin forced the Pharisees to break two of the 10 commandments - "You shall have no other gods before me. And...you shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything." (Exodus 20:3,4)

So...what exactly brought these strange bed-fellows (the Herodians and the Pharisees) together? It was their mutual fear and hatred (malice) of Jesus due to his growing influence as a prophet of Israel.

I chuckled out loud this week as I read a paraphrase of today's passage from the *Christian Century* magazine. ⁽¹⁾ I quote: "This time it's the Herodians and the Pharisees who conspire to trap Jesus. Their topic of choice – Imperial taxes – could have been plucked from the moderator's cue cards in a presidential debate. At first they sound like big-money lobbyists seeking to influence a congressional

committee chair, offering slavish praise of their target's character. Beneath the flatter we can imagine closed captioning that reveals their unspoken thoughts:

--Teacher, we know that you are sincere...

(To be honest, we think you're full of it.)

--and you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth...

(We might call it fake news).

--and you show deference to no one...

(By the way, why don't you defer more readily to our authority?)

--They press on and ask: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?

Money, politics and religion. Good Lord, we find all three right here in today's scripture...topics that supposedly should not be discussed in polite company, much less in worship! Interesting.

As agents of Rome, the Herodians favor the tax and may well be lining their own pockets before the revenue gets shipped out of the province. The Pharisees, however, like other Jewish people in the day, resent the tax as well as the idolatrous image of Caesar that was struck on the face of the coins required to pay it. If Jesus supports the tax, the Pharisees can accuse him of disloyalty to God. If he opposes the tax, the Herodians can charge him with sedition, or at the very least, ensure that his name appears on the first-century equivalent of the FBI watchlist.

Always one to speak in parables and images, Jesus asks for the coin. Then refuses their framing and offers a different picture, suggesting that God's values are not the same as the world's values. 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that belong to God.'"

This rebuttal by Jesus ends the debate. But what are we to make of this contentious exchange today? What does it "mean" for us? Some preachers immediately turn to politics and argue that this story supports the separation of church and state, or they use it to encourage parishioners to be engaged in both civic affairs and the church, or they push for detailed stances on various political issues of the day that they feel line up with their understanding of the Kingdom of God. Others take this passage in the direction of stewardship – seizing the opportunity to remind their congregations that God owns everything, urging generosity and faithful use of one's money for God's kingdom.

I think, however, that our emphasis must be on that little word “image” in Jesus’s question when he asks, “whose image is on the coin” required for the Imperial tax? Most of the scholars I read this week point out that Jesus’s use of the word “image” would have automatically evoked in his hearers’ minds Genesis 1:26 where God says, “Let us make humans in our image, in our likeness...”

I love the way Pastor David Lose puts it: “With just a few words, Jesus reveals the truth about his would-be accusers and simultaneously calls them to a higher fidelity than they’d imagined. The key question, after all, is not whose image is on the coin...but whose image is on us? And that’s what seems to get lost in conversations about money and politics. For while we may feel strongly about our political loyalties, before we are Democrat, Republican or Independent, we are Christian. And that means we are first, foremost, and forever God’s own beloved children.

And that identity (as Christians and beloved children of God) in turn shapes our behavior. Made in the image and likeness of God, we are to act like God. Not like gods, who lord their authority over others for self-gain, but rather like God who call us to serve as God’s agents, as Jesus’s partners in establishing God’s kingdom, and living according to Kingdom values.” (2)

I can hear some of you asking, “Does that mean we say nothing about the issues of the day?” Certainly not! But it does mean that when we name the issues of the day, we recognize the complexity of those issues and do our best to hold them up to the values we see in Jesus’s life and teaching.

Before I segué into the offering, I’ll raise one such issue today, by referencing the *Christian Century* magazine as I did at the beginning of the sermon. The topic is racism in our country. (3) Systemic racism to be exact. And the short article is titled “Oppression by design: The way we build our cities is racist.” In his article, architect Gabe Colombo spells it out. He says, in short, “architecture and city planning have been instruments of power and oppression for millennia. Yet when you think of systemic racism, these disciplines are likely not the first that come to mind.” Starting in the 1930’s and moving forward to today, Colombo exposes how both the subtle, and not so subtle, use of urban planning and design have been used to oppress blacks and persons of color. The horrific use of “redlining”

in the not-so-distant past, and current conflicts around “affordable housing” in suburbs (including our own) are cases in point.

Speaking of systemic racism, I am so proud of three of our High School youth who recently enrolled in the Justice Generation program offered by our Northern Illinois Conference. Its purpose is to help youth better understand systemic racism and do something about it. In short, our youth are assuming leadership roles today – right now -and have much to teach the rest of us. Indeed, there is hope for today and the future! Amen.

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Pastor Rich Darr

- (1) Audrey West, “Jesus Reframes the Question,” Living by the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary, *The Christian Century*, October 16, 2020.
- (2) David Lose, “Image, Likeness and Identity.” Blog: *In the Meantime*, October 17 and “Money, Politics and Religion (Oh my!),” Blog: *In the Meantime*, October 2014.
- (3) Gabe Tiberius Colombo, “Oppression by design: The way we build our cities is racist,” *The Christian Century*, October 7, 2020, pp. 32-34.