**October 19, 2014 – 19th Sunday after Pentecost**

**© 2014 Jean E. Mornard**

Today’s Gospel is one of the most uncomfortable passages in the entire New Testament. Which probably means it’s one of the most important ones to pay special attention to.

Let’s start with the players in this little drama. The Pharisees aren’t actually in this picture, this time. Instead, they send their disciples. This could have been because of the other group who went along, the Herodians. The Herodians were a Jews, but they were a political party that sympathized with the Herodian Dynasty, and specifically Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and Roman puppet. The Bible doesn’t specifically say the two groups didn’t get along, but the Pharisees seemed to focus more on the spiritual aspects of Judaism rather than the political leanings of both the Herodians and the Sadducees, so at the very least, they didn’t have much in common.

However, whether they actually agreed on other issues or not, they certainly seemed to agree on the matter of Jesus, and these unlikely bedfellows headed off to the Temple together in order to entrap him.

The trap was simple. First, butter him up so he lets his guard down. “"Teacher,” they say, smarmily, “we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth.” The funny thing is, in their malice, they actually describe Jesus perfectly.

Well obviously, the Pharisees didn’t fill either their disciples nor the Herodians in on what a canny debater Jesus could be, because when they then spring their oh so clever trap on him, they fully expect to take him down.

“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” As you probably know by now, I have a running cartoon track going in my head most of the time, so I can’t help but hear that line in a Snidely Whiplash voice, and maybe accompanied by an evil laugh. And for those of you who are too young to know who Snidely Whiplash is, ask me later. But back to our own drama.

The trap is simple. If Jesus says they should pay taxes, the Jews will take him for a Roman sympathizer or collaborator and he’ll lose his popular backing, and if he says they shouldn’t, the Romans will arrest him for sedition. Win-win!

But Jesus is way ahead of them and instead of answering, he says, “show me the coin used for the tax.” And without realizing that they have now lost control of the situation, they toss over a denarius. The word used for coin here is not denarius, but “*kénsos*” which means roughly, “current coin of tribute.” It’s the word from which our word “census” comes, and meant the enrollment of all subjected people which allowed the Romans to know who owed how much tribute to Caesar. Notably, it could only be paid in Roman coins – the very ones that the Herodians and Pharisees’ disciples were showing Jesus.

This specific coin was stamped with the image of Tiberius Caesar, and an inscription identifying him as the son of the divine Augustus. One interesting thing to note is that these supposedly devout Jews have carried this coin into the Temple with them. The Temple where there used to be money changers outside who would change Roman money into temple money for a fee (at least until Jesus chased them all out) because it was a violation of Jewish law to call anyone a god but God, and also a violation of the second commandment to carry anything with a graven image. But even though they are in flagrant violation of the Torah, Jesus doesn’t call them on this, except to call them hypocrites.

Instead, he just says the famous phrase, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.” I always think the King James version sounds much more fancy and important than our own tepid, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.” But you get the idea.

And this is where it gets uncomfortable. What exactly was Jesus saying here? That’s a good question. Well, what he’s NOT telling us is to evenly divide our loyalties, or even our finances, between God and earthly concerns, although that’s how it has been too often interpreted. Too often people talk and act as if their financial or business life has nothing to do with God, specifically because of this passage. They will be ruthless in their business dealings during the week, and then piously sit in church on Sunday, and think that this is okay with God.

But Jesus makes it pretty clear that it’s NOT okay, as evidenced by what he says much earlier in Matthew in chapter 6, verse 24, “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

So what Jesus is saying is to give back to Caesar everything that has his picture on it, but by the same token, give back to God everything that has HIS picture on it. And what would that be? That would be US. Every one of Matthew’s community would have known Genesis 1:26 – “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.’” WE are the coins that are stamped with God’s image.

Jesus is saying that our proper tribute to God is ourselves. As it says in our own Book of Common Prayer in Rite I,

*And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee that we, and all others who shall be partakers of this Holy Communion, may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son Jesus Christ, be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction, and made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him.*

Every week we walk in love up to God’s altar and offer our own tribute coin, the one with God’s face on it.

This is why it’s so important to share communion together as a community. Every week, we make the declaration together that our loyalty and our love and our sacrifice are for God alone. And we are not alone in this. Whenever we celebrate the Eucharist, we are celebrating with our brothers and sisters all over the world and throughout time. And, more importantly, we are celebrating with Christ, whose sacrifice came first.

This is so important. It’s the center of our life together. Every week, we affirm together what we declare in baptism – that we belong entirely to God. Whatever we give to our own version of Caesar, to the IRS, or to our savings or retirement accounts, or anywhere else, we must never forget that our first allegiance is to God.

Just exactly what it means to give ourselves back to God is probably different for every person. It might mean taking the time to be intentional in our prayer life or Bible study. It might mean volunteering to help those less fortunate than we are. It might mean giving sacrificially when the pledge cards come around in a little while. It might mean making coming to church on a Sunday a priority over other things.

Whatever it is for you, keep this in mind, especially as you come forward to share in Christ’s body and blood today. We belong entirely to God. We are made in his image, and meant to give ourselves back to him, every day, every hour, every minute of our lives.

As Paul wrote to the Romans, in what I think is one of the most important passages in the New Testament, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Amen.