

October 22, 2023
Lectionary 29, Year A
The 21st Sunday after Pentecost
Isaiah 45:1-7
Matthew 22:15-22
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

The Things that are God's

For the past three weeks and today, our gospel readings have been telling us and are telling us about the ever-growing conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of his religion.

In the gospel reading three weeks ago, the chief priests and elders of the people confronted Jesus in the Temple, asking him by whose authority he was acting.

In the gospel reading two weeks ago Jesus, still in the Temple told a parable in the hearing of the chief priests and the pharisees that made them want to arrest him, but they couldn't because of his popularity with the crowds.

No one could have been happy hearing the crazy complicated parable of last week, least of all the religious leaders, who could easily have thought that the people who had rejected the king's invitation to the banquet represented them.

By the time we get to today's gospel reading, there are no pretenses. The religious leaders are not innocently questioning Jesus. They're not trying to figure him out. They're not trying to get to know him. They're not trying to learn from him.

We heard two weeks ago that they wanted to have Jesus arrested, but they were too scared to do it. This week we hear that they're trying to trap Jesus. They're trying to get him to say or do something that will justify them in arresting him.

So, two groups of leaders get together, the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees were religious leaders. The Herodians were more political.

The Pharisees, while they weren't revolutionaries, saw it as their task to keep Judaism separate from the Roman Empire, and, more to the point, from the Roman pantheon of gods. They worked hard to keep Jews faithful to Judaism and to keep Rome from condemning the Jews for their refusal to participate in the cultic rituals that went along with being part of the Roman Empire, which included emperor worship.

The Herodians were supporters of the Herodian kings, like Herod the Builder and Herod Antipas, who were nominally Jewish, but who were mostly Roman puppet kings, who paid lip service the religion of their people and did whatever they needed to do to appease Rome and so that they could stay in power.

Pharisees and Herodians were not factions within Judaism who would have had much in common or who would have had much experience in working together. But you know that saying, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend?" The Pharisees and Herodians had a common enemy and his name was Jesus.

Jesus was a problem for the Pharisees because he challenged their interpretation of the law, which challenged many of the markers of Jewish identity in a pagan world. Jesus was a problem for the Herodians because he threatened to upset the delicate semi-peace that existed between Rome and the Jews. If that peace were upset or overturned then the Herodian kings could lose their thrones. So, these opposing factions, one group super-committed to faithful Jewish practice and one group that could be looked at as Jews in name only, got together to trap Jesus.

And in order to do it, the Pharisees had to bring an image of the emperor, who, in Roman understanding, was a god, into the Temple. This was a big no-no.

The reason that the money changers, the ones whose tables Jesus had overthrown were in the outer courts of the Temple, outside of consecrated space, in the first place was that faithful Jews couldn't bring Roman money into the Temple to do things like make their offerings, was because Roman money had an image of the

emperor on it. You weren't allowed to bring the image of another god into the Temple.

But the Pharisees, who had spent a lot of their time during Jesus' ministry criticizing him for the way that he kept the law and made exceptions to the law, made an exception to the law. Maybe they figured that Jesus was a big enough threat, an existential enough threat, that making this one exception was worth it, even though they weren't really exception to the law people.

The trap that the Pharisees and the Herodians had planned was a clever one. Because no matter which way he answered they would have him.

If he said that it was lawful to pay taxes, his popularity with the crowds would wane because Rome was not popular with many of the people and taxes are rarely popular with anyone. If Jesus' popularity with the crowds waned, his opponents could arrest him without it causing too much of a problem.

On the other hand, if he said that it was unlawful to pay taxes to the emperor, then they could report him to the Roman police and the Romans would arrest him as a rabble rouser, a dissident. And you know what happened to them? There were crosses all over Judea and Galilee to remind people what happened to those who threatened to disrupt the Pax Romana.

With this question about taxes, I'm sure that the Pharisees and the Herodians, religious and political leaders thought that they had found a trap that Jesus couldn't wiggle out of. They started it with a honey sweet compliment. The bait, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality..." (Matthew 22:16) Then they sprang the trap, "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" (Matthew 22:17)

And then, Jesus blew their minds. He saw the trap for what it was and didn't wiggle out of it, but sidestepped it, turning their question into a question of his

own, that probably left his questioners squirming, and that might leave us squirming too.

He asked them for a coin, the denarius that they were breaking their own laws by having in the Temple in the first place. And when they gave it to him, he asked, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” (Matthew 22:20) Just by asking that question he pointed out the fact that they had brought a pagan idol into the Temple, which probably garnered them some raised eyebrows among those who were present for this confrontation. And then he said, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22:21) And what is God’s?

The image of the emperor was on the coin. So does that mean that the coin belonged to the emperor. And where does the image of God exist in the world? The Pharisees would have known the answer to this question. They would have taught children and adults that the humankind had been created in the image of God. So, they would have known that they belonged to God, that they were to be offerings to God, because they were made in the image of God. I wonder if the Pharisees and the Herodians went away pondering if they were living their lives in such a way that they were offerings to God.

And what about that coin? The image of emperor was on it, but where it did come from? According to scripture and the pharisees own teaching all things had been created by God. So, who did the coin belong to, really? Didn’t, according to the Pharisees’ own theology, everything belong to God?

Jesus didn’t really answer the question. Instead, he created new questions, for the Pharisees and the Herodians and for us.

What does it mean to be the place where the image of God dwells in the world? What does it mean to see the image of God in the people around us, of every nation, of every race, of every religion, of every tongue? What does it mean

to give to God the things that are God's? What does it mean that everything that we have, truly belongs to God, the creator?

The Pharisees and the Herodians failed in their attempt to trick Jesus into saying something that could get him arrested. They failed to trap him. But they gave us a gift and a challenge, because as a result of their trap, we have these words, these concepts to live with.

Perhaps the Pharisees and the Herodians walked away from this encounter simply wondering what ploy they could use next to get rid of this troubling and troublesome teacher.

But we who worship this teacher as our God, can't just walk away. We have to take his words and let them bind us, for the image of God dwells in us, and all that we have belongs to God. And we are left with the question, the challenge. What does it mean for us to offer to God the things that are God's? Amen.