

A Trick Question and a Life-Giving Answer
Pentecost 22
October 22, 2017
Matt. 22:15-22

Dear Friends in Christ,

The question put to Jesus in today's Gospel was a trick question, which was asked by the Pharisees and the Herodians who had "laid plans to trap him in his words." The trouble with trick questions is that they are tricky. And often the trick is that they are based on a false premise. A very famous trick question took place in one of the seven debates between young Abraham Lincoln and his opponent Stephen A. Douglas during the fall of 1858. In one of those seven debates, so the story goes, Douglas asked Lincoln a pointed question, and Lincoln had offered a very lengthy and a rather evasive answer. Finally Douglas got angry and said he didn't want a long answer, just a simple yes or no. Lincoln replied that some questions cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Douglas challenged his opponent: "Ask me a question that I cannot answer with a simple yes or no." And Lincoln replied, "Have you stopped beating your wife?"

The problem with that question (as Lincoln well knew) was in the basic underlying assumption of it. It was built on a false premise, the premise that Douglas was (or had been) beating his wife. And, although it is not quite as obvious, the real problem with the question put to Jesus in today's Gospel, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?", was likewise built on a false premise. Part of the trick in that trick question lay in the people who asked it, "the Pharisees and the Herodians." It's interesting that these two political enemies joined up to try to discredit Jesus. One of those groups, the Pharisees, was fiercely loyal to the concept of Jewish nationalism, convinced that the Messiah would be sent by God to overthrow the rule of Rome and restore the state of Israel to the power and glory it had enjoyed under David and Solomon. For such people even to recognize Rome (as by paying taxes to Caesar) was considered an act of religious disobedience, a kind of way of being unfaithful to the God who had made his promises.

The other group, the Herodians, on the other hand, had made their peace with the idea of foreign rule; in fact, in many instances they were even managing to turn a profit from it, and they were convinced that the Roman government was, at this moment of history, the government which had been duly appointed by God himself to govern them. For Jesus to say taxes were not to be paid would be regarded as an act of revolution, to be reported to the authorities. So Jesus was caught. Either answer of paying taxes to Caesar would be a wrong answer, which would antagonize half his questioners. "Have you stopped beating your wife?" might have been an easier one to deal with.

But, the problem was not so much in the answer as in the question, and the real problem is in the basic assumption with which it was asked, the assumption that life can be divided into neat little categories, with everything nicely filed into its own slot, including God. Take money, for example (since that's the example that is before us). What do you do when you get your paycheck (or your allowance)? You divide it up, of course; it's called budgeting: so much for housing, so much for food, so much for clothing, so much for utilities, so much for travel and entertainment, so much for health and grooming, so much for God. Pigeonholes, into which all our priorities get sorted.

We can do the same thing with time (to use another example), since time--like money--is given to us in limited quantities and so must be budgeted: so much for work or school, so much for travel, so much for eating and sleeping, so much for recreation and entertainment, so much for God. You almost have to slot it into various pigeonholes or you run out of it. Except that in both those examples there is a basic mistake, a false premise. Did you catch it? Someone may have noticed that in both those instances (money and time) I put GOD at the end of the list, in the last pigeonhole. In the light of the First Commandment, we should probably want to say that God should be in the first pigeonhole rather than the last, right? But that is the real mistake, the false premise, a basic assumption, which is still as misleading as the underlying assumption in "Have you stopped beating your wife?" And that assumption is that God belongs in a pigeonhole, that God is somehow on a par with everything else that claims our attention and our allegiance in life. The point that Jesus made in his answer--the point his questioners had overlooked in their very questioning--is that God belongs in the question of paying taxes ... but God belongs not just as another pigeonhole (whether last or first) but as GOD. God is not a pigeonhole in our lives; he is the whole list.

"Whose picture and whose name is written on this?" Jesus asked about the silver coin in his hand. And his answer was then based on their answer. In a similar vein we could carry the conversation one question farther: Jesus could next pick up each one of us like a coin and ask the same question about us: "Whose likeness and inscription is on this?" The answer, we know, goes all the way back to creation when God said "Let us make mankind in our likeness, in our image" ... and for us personally it goes all the way back to our baptism, doesn't it? "Whose likeness and name is this?" -- "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" were we baptized. Made in God's image and born again into the image of Christ in Baptism, we are God's children; we belong to God. Of course, someone might have argued with Jesus that day, "But no matter whose picture is on that coin, it's mine. I earned it!" And to that argument, Jesus could have given a trick answer: "Right!, he could have said. And if that is so, then let's take another look at you--because I earned you! I paid my life on the cross to buy you back to God. I suffered your punishment and paid your debt in order that you might be forgiven, restored to the image of God. The inscription on you is CHRISTIAN--you belong to me!" Your life, therefore, is not a matter of flipping a coin to see where God fits in.

Today our Lord asks of each one of us "Whose likeness and inscription do **you** bear?". If the answer--the happy, eternal life-giving answer--is "God's likeness" ... then the result follows without question: "Render therefore unto God what is God's!" In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.