

My six year old son, Danny sometimes rides his bike along with me while I jog. Especially under these pandemic circumstances, it's a nice time for Danny to get some space from his brother and his sister, and some time alone with his dad. And he takes advantage of it, basically chatting non-stop for my first step to my last. He's particularly fond of posing questions meant to trap me into some surpurlative affirmations. Like, "Dad, am I a terrible soccer player? Or the best soccer player you've ever seen?" Or, "Dad am I bad at drawing Pokemon or am I the best Pokemon drawer in the whole world?" Oh, my favorite, this one actually posed to my wife, Colette, while they were on a walk, "Mom, do you hate me? Or am I your favorite kid?"

Danny knows the power of a well-crafted question and the Pharisees and the Herodians are up to something similar in this passage from the gospel of Matthew this morning, when they asked Jesus this question about paying taxes, paying tribute to the emperor. They're trying to trap Jesus. It's important to know that the Pharisees and the Herodians cooperation here is surprising. The Herodians were associated with Herod, the client King of Judea, who was appointed to rule and was supported by Rome. The Herodians also authorized the chief priests at the temple. The Pharisees, meanwhile were no great fans of the Herodians because like many Judeans, they resented Roman rule and the Herodians capitulation to it.

So these two factions divided over the question of who should rule Judea, come to Jesus and ask him this question. This is not just any question. And these are not just any two groups of questioners. It's a trap. If Jesus says, "Pay the tax," and the Pharisees can denounce him. If he says, "Don't pay it," then the Herodians will. Either way Jesus is caught. This is what makes Jesus's response so clever. He avoids both traps while still managing to tell the truth, "Because if we are to render unto God, all that belongs to God. And if God is all in all, then what doesn't belong to God, what will be left for Caesar?"

I should note that there's a long tradition of Christian theology that basically reads this line from scripture as evidence for God's rule as administered through two concurrent and fully sanctioned authorities, the secular and the sacred. Or in a previous age, the Kings and the Popes. But that seems to me to misunderstand Jesus's basic separation of Caesar's rule from God's here and the subsequent implication that God's rule entirely overwhelms the significance of Caesars. So it's a good response from Jesus, but it's also sort of a political response, the sort of response we become painfully familiar with in this election season.

And maybe it's because I'm tired of the evasions of politicians this October, but it makes me wonder is Jesus just warming out of a difficult question here is cleverness of virtue on its own. Is Jesus trying to spin his response to tell the truth only by implication sort of out of the side of his mouth? So he won't have to suffer the repercussions for telling the truth more directly. It does sound a little like this is what Jesus is doing on one view, but I don't think that's what's going on here because we know that Jesus was in fact quite willing to speak uncomfortable truths to the Herodians and the Pharisees and the chief priests. In the chapter before this one, he tells the priests that the tax collectors and the sex workers will be welcomed into God's kingdom before the religious leaders will be.

In the next chapter, he will spend most of his breath denouncing the scribes and the Pharisees when he's not foretelling the destruction of the temple. And for telling God's judgment upon all those who fail to serve the needy. And Jesus does suffer the consequences for these provocations. At the end of his diatribe in chapter 26, the chief priests finally decide to arrest Jesus and to have him killed. We know how the story ends with trial and crucifixion, and it ends the way it does largely because of what Jesus is saying right here in his lines.

So there was something more than clever political spin in this answer. This isn't an evasion, it's an accusation, an accusation unmistakable, and that charge Jesus levees, "You hypocrites." An accusation

that spurs exactly the violent response and he spins should seek to avoid, an accusation that leaves his interrogators awe-struck. So what is it? Why does this answer, which at first glance seems an evasion instead expose Jesus's interrogators as hypocrites? Let me fill out the setting for this story a bit more. We are in the 22nd Chapter of Matthew, the homestretch of this gospel. Jesus has just entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He has arrived for the final time in the city where he will meet his death and recall the first thing he does once he enters Jerusalem with the crowds of revelers, cheering him on.

He goes to the temple and he overthrows the tables of the money changers. Roman currency was not allowed for use on temple grounds. And so all the Jewish pilgrims from all over the empire who were visiting Jerusalem for Passover, all of these folks, many of whom were very poor, all of them were hoping to offer sacrifice at the temple. And they had to change their Roman and foreign coins into temple currency. Jesus sees these poor people arriving from all over the diaspora. He sees them being swindled by the money changers and the dove sellers at the temple. So he overturns their tables and calls the dove sellers and the money changers, thieves and robbers.

Now it's a day or two later, but Jesus is in the temple again. And the priests and the elders are sending folks to trap Jesus precisely because of the commotion he has just caused a temple business, precisely because of the disruption he has caused. This is the background for the Herodians and the Pharisees question to Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay tribute to Caesar?" Jesus answers their question with a question of his own, "Whose image is on the coin and whose title?" And somehow this simple observational question is both an accusation and a provocation. Why? Jesus asks for two things, the image and the title. Much like our own money, ancient Roman currency was stamped with a profile of a person in this case, the Emperor Tiberius. But under that image was inscribed the following title, "Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the divine Augustus."

Think of that. This is rank idolatry. This coin names the emperor as God's son. This coin on its face, arrogates to Caesar what rightly belongs to God. This is why Jesus asks his interrogators to speak this title out loud. And it's also why they avoid doing so because it's blasphemy. The son of God asks these Herodians and Pharisees who the son of God truly is, and they won't answer, but they don't need to because their response is jangling around in their pockets. So much for the title. What about the image then? This isn't a question without reference. Recall how the book of Genesis recounts the creation of human beings.

"In the image of God," the scripture tells us, "God created them." Using the same Greek word in translation for image that Jesus uses here. This is the Jewish claim. The Christian claim that we humans bear the image of God on our bodies. So these leaders, these chief priests and Herodians and Pharisees are exploiting the poor, exploiting the crowds, betraying the image of God all for the sake of a blasphemous image of Caesar stamped on the silver in their pockets. The extent of their failure to recognize God's image in the people is only made more dramatic by our story from Exodus this morning, where God withdraws from Moses's sight, obscures God's self from Moses's vision. There is no other vision of God than the image of God we have in our neighbor.

The sight of any human being is the only vision of the divine we are privy to. This is what's at stake in this lesson. This is why Jesus's response is a provocation and an accusation rather than merely an evasion. It's why the Herodians and the Pharisees give up trying to trap Jesus with questions and instead turned to trapping him with swords and with soldiers. When we understand what Jesus is asking, it is easy to condemn these Herodians and these Pharisees. But as I've listened to our own leaders and those who would become our leaders answer difficult questions of their own these last several weeks, I've been led to wonder, "Do we fare any better than the Herodians and the Pharisees?" These ancient folks are easy to accuse, but can we modern folks be so easily absolved?

What would it mean if we truly accepted the premise of Jesus's response that every human being reflects God's sacred image and that therefore to displace our concern for human lives and flourishing with a devotion to power and fortune is on its face a blasphemy. What might it mean to build a politics out of Jesus's vision, to build a world not out of the mealy mouth evasion of politicians who hope to remain in power. But instead out of our collective commitment to that fundamental claim, that basic essential, radical claim that each human life is sacred, that each human being bears God's image. What could our world look like if we honor the image of God stamped on the bodies of our neighbors and our enemies and ourselves, instead of reverencing revenue and the promise of ever rising profits?

To cite two grim examples from our own day. The private prison industry in this country is a \$4.8 billion business. Its history reaches back to the years following The Civil War, but it has exploded with the metastatic growth of mass incarceration in this country since the 1980s. Its profitability is absolutely without question, also without question is the image of God stamped on 2.3 million souls languishing in American prisons right now. Or consider the firearms industry, which is a \$16 billion business with evidence sanction in our country's founding documents. Nineteen million firearms were sold in the United States in the first six months of this calendar year, meanwhile 33,000 people, each one bearing God's indelible image have been killed by guns in America in the last nine months.

These are just two examples from our common life in America today. But already I have to ask what have we given over here to Caesar, which in fact belongs rightly to God. This is the basic question Jesus posed in response to the Herodians and the Pharisees. And if we're honestly willing to listen, it's also the question Jesus poses to us. It's not a question about taxes. It's a question about faith sitting in a place of worship as these Herodians and Pharisees did then, and as we do now, even as you listen to this broadcast wherever you are, it is also a question about worship. "Whom do you truly worship?" Jesus asks. "In whom do you place your faith?" Jesus asks. "Where do you put your trust?" Jesus asks. "Whom do you truly and finally serve?" Jesus asks.

Is it the image of Caesar on those coins? Or is it the image of God on each face in the world around you? Jesus's hearers back then knew they had no answer or rather the only answer they had was one they were not willing to speak out loud. So they walked away. When Christ comes and asks us the same question, I hope we will have found a better response.