

## **Sermon for Sunday, October 22, 2023**

“Politics make strange bedfellows.” So says a popular adage, and we’ve seen it in action over the decades. People from across ideological or political divides working together to overcome the challenge of making something happen, or more often, to avoid something they both dislike becoming a new reality.

It is shown in stark relief in today’s gospel. Herodians are Jews who are supportive of the oppressive Roman rule. Thus, they’re looked at as traitors, since the Romans consider their emperor to be God. Herodians like the Romans because the Romans keep them as leaders of the Jews. Then there are the Pharisees. If Herodians are fake Jews, pandering to the Roman empire, the Pharisees are ultra-Jews who care about the law of Torah and can’t stand the Romans and Herodians.

And yet they make common cause to address the one person whom they find threatening: Jesus. Jesus has been talking about recasting our relationship with Creator God in a way that is frightening to the Pharisees, who think that Jesus’ reputation as a healer and a teacher undermines their work of reforming people’s understanding of and attention to Torah. While Jesus doesn’t directly address the Herodians and the Roman Empire, he subtly preaches that there will be relief for those who love the one true God and who are oppressed by the empire.

What do they do? They try to craft a question that will either expose him as anti-Roman or as anti-Torah. And like smarmy individuals throughout history, they start out by being very complimentary to Jesus.

“Oh, Rabbi, you’re awesome! You teach so beautifully, and you treat everyone equally, with no partiality, and you are such an honest person!”

It’s really an intro that can only be described as icky.

And then they get down to brass tacks: “Rabbi, is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor?”

And Jesus knows exactly what’s going on. He knows he’s been in their crosshairs for a while. He knows they’re trying to set him up to either destroy his reputation of care for all equally, or to make him seem like he’s encouraging people to rebel against the Roman empire, or to not be a very good Jew. This last one is subtle: remember that Jewish folks who went to the temple and wanted to make offerings had to exchange their roman coins for temple money, which was not soiled by the image of the Roman Emperor-God on it.

Jesus is having none of it from these strange bedfellows.

He gets angry. Calls them hypocrites. And does something very interesting. He asks them for a coin. A Roman coin, of course, since outside of the temple everyone uses them to buy things.

He poses a question, in that familiar practice of answering a question with a question. “Anybody got a coin? Good. Whose title and picture is on it?”

They say that it is the Emperor’s. And then he simply answers their question by saying, “give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Here’s the clever thing about that answer. He doesn’t say one word about dirty money, or money that suggests that the Emperor is a God. He doesn’t say that the Herodians are lining their own pockets by supporting the Emperor. He doesn’t say that the Pharisees have their own interests in this question because he knows that if taxes aren’t paid, the temple and the Pharisees might gain power when people give more money to the temple.

Instead, he says that if you live in a place where the Emperor taxes the people, justly or unjustly, you’re obligated to pay the taxes to the emperor. His currency, his rules. Not God’s rules, secular rules. He says nothing about whether the taxes are unjust. He simply acknowledges that if you live in a place where there are secular laws, you live according to the secular laws, and that has nothing to do with your obligation to your faith community. Making offerings to the temple according to Torah are part of the divine law code, and you are intended to live according to your religious law as well.

You must examine the realities of the world you live in and your relationship with God. You must make your own decision.

That’s a difficult answer for all of us because we’d like something more clearcut, more recipe book, more yes or no.

As the New Testament scholar Yung Suk Kim has written, “Jesus teaches us ... a critical interpretation of the world, fearless determination thereafter, and conscientious engagement in the world, based on what we believe is true. From Matthew’s perspective, the goal of life is not merely to defeat the empire or adopt an “all-or-nothing” policy but to love people, including enemies, strive after his kingdom and righteousness, and live in hope between now and the future. Until the end, they must continue to pursue the way of God progress...”

Given that we live in a world with more moral and theological quandaries than we can count, that’s not entirely satisfying. But what this gospel points us toward is taking responsibility for our decisions, interpreting the world in a way that

reflects what Jesus taught us, and acting in a way that honors justice and mercy. It's not as easy as having someone tell us yes or no. It requires our own prayer and meditation. And Jesus taught us how to do that.

You can admit you're not sure what's right when you bump against one of those moral quandaries. We all have that experience. But a dart board or a Magic Eight Ball is not the tool of choice. It's prayer. Ask Jesus the question. He will likely suggest that you already know what the right answer is. And then pray to have the courage to do what Jesus has taught us to do: to love one another, to trust in God, to bear good fruit.

You don't need any strange bedfellows leading you astray. You just need Jesus. Amen.