

WHOSE IMAGE

In this morning's gospel lesson from Matthew, the Pharisees and the Herodians hatch a plot against Jesus. These two groups set out to "entrap Jesus in what he said." My seminary classmate and fellow chapel minister for a year, Audrey West helps us read between the lines with her contemporary take on this exchange:

Their topic of choice (taxes) could have been plucked from the moderator's cue cards in a presidential debate. At first they sound like big-money lobbyists seeking to influence a congressional committee chair, offering slavish praise of their target's character. Beneath the flattery we might imagine closed captioning that reveals their unspoken thoughts:

Teacher, we know that you are sincere
[To be honest we think you are full of it],

and you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth
[we might call it fake news],

and show deference to no one
[by the way, why don't you defer more readily to our authority?];

for you do not regard people with partiality
[of course, everybody knows some people are inherently better than others].

They press on and ask: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?

It's a trick question and Audrey goes on to explain why:

Of course, their coalition party would not agree on the proper answer to their own question. As agents of Rome, the Herodians favor the tax and may well be lining their own pockets before the revenue gets shipped out of the province. The Pharisees, however, like other Jewish people of their day, resent the tax as well as the idolatrous image of Caesar that was struck into the face of the coins required to pay it.

If Jesus supports the tax, the Pharisees can accuse him of disloyalty to God. If he opposes the tax, the Herodians can charge him with sedition or, at the very least, ensure that his name appears on the first-century equivalent of an FBI watchlist.

It's a no win situation.

So, what does Jesus do? He steps out of the forced options and takes things in a whole other direction by making a simple request and asking a question:

Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’

You will note that Jesus is apparently not carrying such coinage as he has to ask someone else to produce one. Now, truly faithful Jews would not have been carrying around a coin with Caesar presented as a god and the inscription “Caesar, King and Son of God.” Rome minted other nondescript coins so that faithful Jews could avoid a crisis of conscience. Our passage from Matthew this morning, lifted as it is from its original context does not reveal the setting of Jesus’ conversation with the Herodians and the Pharisees. For that we need to refer back to the previous chapter to be reminded that all this is taking place in the Temple area. By producing a Roman coin the Pharisees and Herodians demonstrate that whatever their views on taxes they, too, are participants in Caesar’s economic system.

Before we rush to judgment, let us pause to reflect on how we ourselves are also deeply enmeshed in an economy often radically at odds with the faith we embrace. We, too, carry the coinage of the realm, whether as change in our pockets, or held in bank accounts accessible by plastic cards with smart chips. At the end of the day, when we empty our pockets onto the nightstand we are no less caught up in the capitalist machinery than our more secular brothers and sisters. So, what are we to do? Instead of providing a nice clean “yes” or “no” – Jesus leaves the matter open-ended. In each generation we must wrestle with the distinction between what is the emperor’s, or Caesar’s or the ruling power’s and what is God’s. It’s a far more complex question that simply whether we should pay taxes or not.

While we are not left with a clear answer, certain guidelines to follow in dealing with the state, with government, with the surrounding economic and political order, I do think Jesus points us in a helpful direction, again, stepping outside of the parameters of the original question. Let us recall the question Jesus posed when presented with the coin: “Whose head is this, and whose title?” In the original language of the New Testament the question is: “Whose *image* is this...?” In referring to the image imprinted on the coin Jesus invites us to consider whose image is imprinted upon us. Lutheran pastor, Mary Anderson helpfully notes:

As God's people we bear the image of God. We have God tattooed on our foreheads and on our hearts. But amazingly, this isn't a one-way street. Isaiah once described God's deep connection and love for us by asking, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands" (Isa. 49:15–16).

God has a tattoo! Isaiah imagines our likeness tattooed on the palm of God's hand. Both Creator and creatures are tattooed with the other's image; we carry each other's pictures around in our wallets. We know that whether it's body art or pictures in our wallets, these symbols are reserved for those we dearly love. These are the ones to whom we are bound by covenants and kinship. There's a deep foreverness about our relationships.

In these challenging times with an election looming it is tempting to substitute other identifiers when we look at others and ourselves: Democrat/Republican; conservative/liberal; mainline/evangelical; rich/poor; highly educated/slightly schooled;

black/white/brown/red/yellow; urban/rural/suburban; men/women/non-binary; gay/straight/bisexual/trans. Any time we make these categories ultimate marks of identity we neglect the image we all bear: the image of God; we forget whose we truly are. Several years ago, a retired pastor passed along this story from Rabbi Arthur Waskow

I was visiting my daughter Shoshana and her family in Illinois. My granddaughter Yonit Slater was then eight years old.

I said to Yonit, “You know, according to the Torah this week, God created human beings in God’s Image. What do you think that means?”

Yonit: “What’s an image?”

Arthur: “Ummmm, Like a photograph.”

Yonit: “That’s strange. God is invisible. How could there be a photograph of God?”

Silence.

Y: “There could be photographs of human beings so maybe it’s more like God is in the image of human beings.”

Silence.

Y: “Only it couldn’t be just one human being, it would have to be lots.”

Silence.

Y: “But we are all different. Each one of us is different. And God couldn’t be in the image of just one of us. So —

Long silence.

Y: “Maybe we’re different from each other like the pieces in my jigsaw puzzle! So you would have to fit all the pieces together.”

Silence.

Y: “And if you fit us all together, we would be a community, and a community is more like God!”

Arthur: *(Silently): [Wow! Maybe I should resign from the midrash business!]*

Rabbi Waskow continues:

For me, this teaching is worthy of standing alongside two ancient midrashim about the Image.

One was from the ancient rabbis, living under the Roman Empire, who said: “When Caesar puts his image on a coin, all the coins come out identical. When the Holy One Who is beyond all rulers puts the Divine Image on the ‘coins’ of human beings – each of the coins come out unique.”

Already this is a teaching about the irreducible dignity and worth of every human being, and how limited is the power of Caesar – of governmental authority — even when it seems most tyrannical, most absolute.

And in this light, I honor a new understanding of what many have thought a puzzling teaching by Rabbi Jesus, reported in the Gospels:

Some of his more conventional colleagues who were troubled by his radical vision demanded whether Jesus thought the people should pay taxes with a Roman coin. When he asked, “Whose image is on this coin?” his accosters answered, “Caesar’s!” According to the written story, he responded – “Then give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s!” ...

What the story does not mention — but may well have happened, it might have been too radical to report — is that he may have put his arm on the shoulder of his questioner and said, “And whose Image is on **this** coin?”

When they realized he was reminding them that God’s Image was on them and of course on every human being, that they and all the people should give their whole selves to God and only dross to Caesar, they went away to think again.

Perhaps we too should think and feel more deeply about the limits on our responsibilities to Caesar. Or Pharaoh. Or any Prime Minister or President or Congress or Corporation CEO or Knesset or Supreme Ayatollah...

I think Yonit intuited their point about the uniqueness of every individual — and then took one more step. They had celebrated the human individual vs. Caesar. She is pointing toward the necessity of connecting those individuals in community; the Divine Image is not truly fulfilled by all those unique Images until they fit together.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow on 10/12/2012; theshalomcenter.org

The encounter between Jesus and the Herodians and Pharisees may appear simply to be about a coin and paying taxes but it offers so much more. At the end of the day, while we participate in an economy and political system which strive to leave their marks upon us, let us not forget that what is most deeply impressed upon us, as well as all of our neighbors far and near, is the image of God – a God that delights in our diversity and call and recalls us into community with each other; a God who also carries our image, all of our images, yours – mine in God’s heart, never forgetting us; present with us now, in this moment, and in the days ahead, come what may, calling us to be God’s image bearers in a world too often tempted to ascribe ultimate loyalty to cheap copies.

AMEN.