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 Matthew 22:15-22; Psalm 96:1-10

Kathy Reid Walker  
 First Presbyterian, Eau Claire

### Psalm 96:1-10

<sup>1</sup>O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth.

<sup>2</sup>Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.

<sup>3</sup>Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.

<sup>4</sup>For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods.

<sup>5</sup>For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.

<sup>6</sup>Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

<sup>7</sup>Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

<sup>8</sup>Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts.

<sup>9</sup>Worship the LORD in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth.[]

<sup>10</sup>Say among the nations, “The LORD is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity.”

### Matthew 22:15-22

<sup>15</sup>Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. <sup>16</sup>So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “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. <sup>17</sup>Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” <sup>18</sup>But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup>Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup>Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” <sup>21</sup>They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” <sup>22</sup>When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

### SERMON: “The Coin Trick”

There’s a scene in the third Star Wars movie *Return of the Jedi*, in which our heroes are advancing to make an assault on the second Death Star. This is when Admiral Ackbar, realizes the danger in the situation they are entering, and states the obvious by uttering his iconic and memetic line “*It’s a trap!*”, thus cementing his place in *Star Wars* history for decades to come.

“It’s a trap!” is the perfect line for someone to speak in this scripture passage. But Jesus doesn’t need someone to point out the obvious. He knows what his questioners are up to before they even speak. It is an odd coupling – the Pharisees and the Herodians – two groups who agreed on virtually nothing except that they both felt threatened by the presence of Jesus and wanted him out of the picture.

It is likely that the Herodians were supporters of Herod Antipas, who had been named king of the Jews by Rome. They, of course, supported paying taxes to Caesar. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were devoted to every little detail of Jewish law and would likely oppose paying taxes to Caesar for religious reasons. Part of their opposition was related to the coin they were required to use for said taxes. It had the image of Caesar and the inscription: Tiberius Caesar, august and divine son of Augustus, high priest. It was a symbol of oppression for the general population and potentially blasphemous to the Pharisees . . . a violation of the first and second commandments.

The tax they are referring to is a Poll tax and was very unpopular amongst Jewish people at the time as well. It supported the army and government that occupied their country.

So, these unlikely bedfellows engage in a little collusion to benefit their mutual desire to remove Jesus from the scene. But they begin the episode with a little feigned flattery. Everything they say is true, but it comes across as dripping with insincerity. No wonder Jesus points out their hypocrisy! The Pharisees know what he teaches and that it is true to Jewish scriptures; they know what he's about. Indeed, Jesus is true, he teaches God's ways, he is beyond showing partiality to the face of anyone. He is unlike the hypocrites who ooze their fake praise. But they are more concerned with entrapment than anything else at this moment.

And then comes the "gotcha" question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Not only does Jesus call them on their hypocrisy, he names what is going on. It's a trap! Is it a political question or a theological question – or both? "The Pharisees hoped that Jesus would support paying taxes to Caesar so the Jewish people would view him as a Roman sympathizer. The Herodians hoped Jesus would oppose paying the tax to Caesar so they could accuse him of treason or sedition against Rome." [*Feasting on the Word: Preaching, A-4, p. 191*] It's a no-win situation for Jesus! But it's not really! Jesus is clever in how he uses words and objects. He is a brilliant orator and debater who will get the best of them.

Most of you are probably familiar with sleight of hand coin tricks. Someone might seem to make a quarter disappear and then magically make it reappear from behind someone's ear. If only I had this skill, I would demonstrate. Well, Jesus is a master at coin tricks and he uses one as a response to the people before him. He asks someone to pull out a denarius, which is a typical day's wage. "Whose head and whose title do you see?" Jesus asks. There's only **one** answer to this question, unlike other times, when Jesus confounds them with an unanswerable question. "It's Caesar," the men proclaim. Pretty hard to come up with any other answer to the obvious.

"Well, then, give to Caesar what's Caesar's and give to God what belongs to God." And then, I imagine the cohort that hoped to trap Jesus responded with gaping mouths, incredulous over his ability to outsmart them. "Curses, foiled again!" They had wanted Jesus to make the people angry, to paint him as a traitor or criminal or both. But instead, Jesus gave an answer that may have led to hope for the people who were basically paying (through their taxes) to be subjugated.

Jesus gave a simple answer to what was intended to be a complicated question. But interpreting Jesus' answer is not so simple. Jesus is in the habit of telling parables and offering statements that leave the hearer wondering what exactly he meant. We can look at this particular answer in a number of ways . . . in a moment.

This past Thursday I had the first of my two cataract surgeries. Some of you know what this experience is like. When the patch was removed from my left eye, I had a new challenge in figuring out how best to see what I was doing until the next eye is done on Monday. If I look through the newly refurbished eye, my distance vision is suddenly fantastic, but closer objects are less clear. If I wear my glasses and look out of my left eye, nothing looks right -- near or far. If I wear my glasses and look out of my right eye I can see pretty well, except that now I realize things are not as distinct as I thought they were. Which lens is used makes a difference.

The same is true when we interpret scripture. The lens we use affects how we view Jesus' words. In preparation for my writing this week, I consulted eight different commentators and each one suggested different emphases or meanings that they drew from the scripture passage. Each had their own lens.

On the surface, Jesus' answer may sound like a basic acknowledgement of the expectation that one must pay taxes to the emperor. But **is** that what he's saying? Maybe it would be if he'd left out the second part of his response – Give to God what is God's. It may seem like we could just make two columns: What Belongs to Caesar and What Belongs to God. That would make it easier, wouldn't it? A place for everything, and everything in its place. But Jesus leaves it up to people to choose who or what they will serve.

As a bit of an aside, it has been pointed out that Jesus carries no coin in his own pocket. He has to ask someone for a coin. Is it because he won't carry one because it bears the image of Caesar? Is it because he manages to live outside the economics of the empire? Is it in protest of the power of the empire? Or maybe it's just because Judas handles all the money. It's an interesting extra detail to wonder about.

Some writers view this story as a mandate to support the government system in which you live. Others suggest that we can be dual citizens – citizens of our country and of the kingdom of God. In some translations the word *render* is used. "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and render unto God that which is God's." The Greek word for *render* is *apodote*, which means to "give what is due by obligation." We may have *obligations* to give to both Caesar (or the IRS) and to God. Jesus **also** makes it an obligation to advocate for and work for justice – to stand up to Caesars and Pharaohs who oppress those who are most in need. Nothing is simple about Jesus' teachings!

One of the interpretations I've often heard is that Jesus is giving an ambiguous answer. When he says to give to God that which is God's – well, doesn't everything belong to God? Including coins with the head of Caesar on them? In Psalm 24, we hear the familiar words: The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it. This suggests that whatever we do with whatever we have, it should be a reflection of our devotion to the One who has given us everything in the world. We may ask ourselves: Where is **my** loyalty? To **whom** do I belong? How do my actions and advocacy efforts reflect my sense of belonging to God – in day to day life and also the political sphere?

Perhaps one of the most compelling interpretations draws on the word *image*. In several translations Jesus asks, "whose *image* and whose inscription" is on the coin. This use of the comparable Greek word for *image* would strike an immediate connection with those familiar with the Hebrew scriptures. In their heads, they would hear the ancient words – humanity was created in the *image* of God! And, what bears the image of God? We do!

Not only that, but God claims us so thoroughly that, according to Isaiah (49:15b-16), God has us tattooed on his hands. With this tattoo metaphor God says, "I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands." We bear God's image – just as the palm of God's hand bears ours.

Commentator Richard Spalding writes, “True the image can sometimes be difficult to recognize. When we look at each other, or in the mirror, we tend to see the inscriptions that our business with the world has left on us: you are what you look like, what you have, what you wear, what you do, the company you keep. Nevertheless, underneath all those inscriptions is a much deeper mark: the kiss of light in the eyes, the watery sign of a cross made once upon a time on the forehead, the image of all those children in the arms of their mothers [and fathers] at baptism, and the little ember of resolve to remember them. All those faces are a part of your face, when you begin to see the image that God sees, the image engraved in the palm of the hand of the God who, in Jesus, stands behind us with full faith and credit. [*Feasting on the Word: Preaching, A-4, p. 192*]

Jesus said, “Render to God that which belongs to God.” “Whatever is rendered to God is whatever bears the divine image.” [*ibid, p. 190*]

As bearers of the image of God, we are called to give to God all that we have and all that we are. What that looks like may differ for each one of us. God gives us the freedom to choose – not only who, but how we will serve. We give to God through our interactions with one another, through governmental systems that care for those most in need, through our financial contributions and by giving of our time and talents. We give to God through our prayers of devotion and our hymns of praise. We give to God when we care for God’s creation, when we work for justice, for wholeness in living, for peace.

Jesus’ words are ringing in our ears. Jesus’ coin trick makes us stop and think. Every time we read the ancient words as they are recorded in the scriptures that inform us, we are given the chance to hear something in a new way – to view through multiple lenses. Read and listen carefully. Open yourselves to previously obscured meanings and seek to recognize misunderstandings about meanings. There may be more than one valid message in what you read. The best rules for considering validity are the ones that form the biblical foundation – the commandments to love God and love one another. As bearers of the image of God, we render to God that which is God’s – our very selves – committed to doing justice, loving mercy, and humbly following in the way of Jesus’ life and teachings.

May it be so.