

Proper 24 A 2020
Matthew 22:15-22

Spending God's Currency
By the Rev. Salying Wong

(Hold coin) When they brought him a denarius coin, Jesus asked, "Whose head is this, and whose title?...Render to Caesar what is Caesars to God what is God's."

The Roman ear hears, "Pay the emperor his taxes." If there had been any Romans hanging about the court of gentiles at the temple, they would probably have shrugged their shoulders and gone about their day. But to the Jewish ear, what would it hear?

It is to be noted that Jesus begins and ends his temple teaching around money. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus starts his final week of life at the temple by turning over the tables of the money changers and calls them "a den of thieves". This ignites the confrontation with the religious authorities at the temple, where they ask Jesus by what authority he is doing these things. It is also at the temple that he witnesses a widow putting in her last two mites into the coffers and says, "Beware of the scribes and Pharisees who devour widow's houses." (Mark 12) He also says, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.' He finishes his temple teaching with this final confrontation about money. "Render to caesar what is caesar's and to God what is God's."

The invention of money has an interesting history in Palestine. Before there was money, people bartered for goods. But that became burdensome. Imagine you're an apple farmer and every time you needed toilet paper, you had to carry with you a bushel of apples? So a precious metal was used to represent the worth of those goods and this was measured out by weight. Shekel literally

means “weight”. But that weight and purity had to be trustworthy to actually serve as money. Minters pledged their reputation on the weight by stamping their image on the metal. Thus began the tradition of putting an image on a coin. Eventually, the tradition was to put the ruler of the land on the coin. When the Pharisees pulled out a denarius, the head of Emperor Tiberius was on it. It bore his image.

The shekel was the money of the Temple. More specifically, the money was the Tyre Shekel, which was minted in the city of Tyre, up north. The Tyre Shekel had high fidelity, a trustworthy weight of silver. During my research, I was surprised to learn that the Tyre Shekel had an image of a pagan god on it. (See bulletin cover.) I had been under the impression it was the money changers job to change Roman money, which bore the head of Caesar, to acceptable non-image bearing money. What I learned instead is that because the Tyre Shekel was so trusted, the religious authorities allowed for it in the temple so that the treasury would be stocked with good money. (Mishnah). The money-changer got a commission for changing Roman money to acceptable shekels. It was their exorbitant rates and the drift of their overflowing stalls into the holy places in the temple that Jesus took issue with.

Not liking Jesus’ teachings on money at the temple, today the Pharisees and the Herodians come to trap Jesus in treason with the question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?” Jesus uses this moment to unveil something essential about what it means to be human. Jesus asks, “Bring me a coin used for the tax.” And one of them fishes through his trousers and proffers up a denarius. Imagine what the faithful Jews around were thinking--those who had come on pilgrimage all around Palestine and paid exorbitant rates to change their foreign money to temple money. There might have been a few harrumphs when a denarius was produced in shekel land. Jesus then asks, “Whose head is on it and what title?” They say, “Caesar.” The title written on it would have been, “Son of God.” (See bulletin cover.) At this point, he might have turned from his questioners to the crowd, “Render to caesar what is caesar’s. And to God what is God’s.”

The gentiles would hear, "Pay your taxes." The Jewish ear would hear a riddle. The ear begins to ring with a reading from Genesis, "God made humankind in God's image." It echoes with commandments from the decalogue, "Make for thyself no graven image. Thou shall have no gods but me." They might imagine God fashioning Adam from the dust and then stamping God's image on him, the way the minters stamp their coins. Next, God stamps God's image on Eve. And then also on them. They might have concluded that since they bear God's image, they actually don't belong to themselves. When they heard Jesus say, "Render to God what is God's," they would need to think hard about what is being posited and what it means about who they think they are.

It is reality that life is a series of capitulations that we don't always have the wherewithal to resist. The temple okayed an image of a pagan god because the Tyre Shekel was good money. Was that wrong? You have to pay taxes to an oppressive regime that uses the money to pay the legions that police oppression. Was that wrong? For us today, we might ask, "Is it okay to drive my car when our planet is warming? Is it okay to drive an electric car where the battery means the destruction of thousands of pounds of terrain in a poor country? How do you keep your hands clean and go to sleep at night convinced that you're a good person?"

One way of thinking about what Jesus is doing is trying to show us that it would be self-deception and arrogance to dice up our lives and apply a mathematics of goodness because we do such and such, but not such and such. The lie behind it is that it is up to us, that we own our lives. But what Jesus is doing here is saying our whole life belongs to God. What is good about us is God's goodness, God's image. It is grace.

We are in the midst of our stewardship season, and this passage from Matthew can help us contemplate what belongs to God and what belongs to us. What do we actually own? Who holds the deed to the dwelling of our souls? If I belong to God and not to myself, how am I freed to practice faith-filled generosity for the

building up of this community? What would it mean to be God's currency in this world? How would you spend your life?