

Images

You can't turn on the evening news without hearing all the partisan hoopla about taxes.

The Herodians, yesterday's Democrats, love taxes.

The Pharisees, yesterday's Republicans, hate taxes.

The Herodians were, as you know, the lackeys loyal to King Herod.

Herod was installed and protected by Rome, Rome's very own "King of the Jews."

The Pharisees, as you also know, were the self-described holy class who despised the Roman occupation, except when Rome did their bidding.

Before this troublemaker Jesus showed up, these groups got along as well as the Tea Party and the Wall Street Occupation crowds; as well as President Obama and John Boehner....

Have you noticed how dealing with the radical challenge that is Jesus changes even the worst of enemies into the best of friends?

So this gang, Pharisees and Herod supporters, have a meeting one morning at the Big City Diner, plotting how to make Jesus hoist himself on his own petard.

You can almost hear them cackling at the ingenuity of it all.

"First, let's butter him up!"

"Let's tell him how sharp he is, what a straight talker he is, how he's afraid of no one!"

"Then, while his head is getting big, throw him the "yes" or "no" question on paying taxes.

"Genius!!" they declare, slapping one another on the back.

As divisive as the tax issue is for us today, it was even worse in 30 A.D. Israel.

To say "no" to the Roman tax is to invite arrest and execution as an enemy of the Empire.

Twenty-five years earlier, a tax rebellion led to thousands of Jews being crucified, corpses hanging from crosses, mile after mile from Jerusalem far out into the country-side.

To say "yes" to the Roman tax is to welcome the hatred of the Jewish people, for then you are a Roman collaborator.

Jesus, it turns out, is neither a Republican nor a Democrat: he's not a Herodian; he's not a Pharisee, and in his response, he's telling us: "if you follow me, you're not one of them either."

Which makes this a really hard reading.

For a long time, many people have taken the famous line "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" as a neat and tidy way to organize their lives.

Give Caesar our public life, and all that goes with it, all the taxes and military service, all of our occupations and protecting the status quo; and give God our private, personal, spiritual life.

What makes that interpretation so attractive is it neatly divides our lives into tightly organized boxes.

More subtly, though, it also keeps God out of most of my day-to-day life, by creating a really big box for my regular life, and a very small box for the God stuff.

So what if Jesus isn't talking about boxes at all?

What if Jesus is reaching down far deeper, what if he's making yet another claim on our entire lives, on the whole of our being?

Like when he teaches that one cannot serve two masters, because she will love the one and hate the other, so that you and I cannot serve both God and money?

Or when he teaches that to save our lives, we must lose them?

Or that all of our worries about making ends meet and having food on the table and money in the retirement account are a fantastic waste of time and an affront to the God who knows the number of hairs on your head and mine.

Maybe that's why Jesus insists that his challengers say out loud whose image is on that coin.

The coin bears Caesar's image.

Give the coin to the one whose image it bears.

But what of us?

Whose image do we bear?

You know.

It's right there in Genesis: "God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them...." Gen. 1:27 CEB.

So perhaps what Jesus is saying is something like this:

"That which Caesar has made, give to Caesar; that which God has made, give to God."

Caesar made coins -- give him back his coins.

God made us -- give yourself, all of yourself, to God.

Which sounds great on a Sunday morning sitting here in the pew, or preaching it from this pulpit.

The rubber, though, hits the road when we leave this place and return to the world of dog-eat-dog competition, of wars and rumors of wars, of who gets taxed and why and all of that just plain human messiness.

In that world, the real world, how are we to live?

It is, in all reality, a problem that we who profess Jesus as our Lord, face on a daily basis.

And yet the Gospel does not leave us without guidance.

It's just that its guidance is so very different from what I myself usually come up with.

Blessed are the meek, the gentle, the peacemakers.

If you are forced to walk a mile, walk two.

If anyone begs from you, give.

Love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you.

Don't return violence with violence, but be willing even to die before killing.

All of this, and so much more, is the foolishness of God, foolishness that is true wisdom, and the only real path to life.

God's foolishness, when we live it in the midst of all the messiness that is human life, scrubs off the grit and grime of doing things our way, so that in the scrubbing, the image of God that is imprinted in you, in me, slowly yet certainly, begins to shine from the inside out, transforming even the worst of us into that which we are created to be.

St. Augustine says it beautifully:

"Become who you already are."

And as we become in our own lives the image of the living God, perhaps then we shall come to know what belongs to Caesar, and what belongs to God.

+amen

