

*Things*

**A sermon preached by**  
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**Text:**  
Matthew 22: 15-22

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## Matthew 22:15-22

[T]he 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.



The world does not function in terms of yes and no, here and there, now and then, right and wrong. Nor does Christianity exist in those kinds of simple, opposite and opposing realms.

Pixar’s successful animated film from a few years ago, *Monsters Inc.*, is about an energy corporation in the monster world which produces electricity for that world to exist – for lights and appliances. The energy is produced by collecting the fearful screams of little children in the human world. The company, Monsters, Inc. harnesses those screams by sending scary monsters through doors that lead to closet doors in children’s bedrooms.

Mike Wisowski (the voice of Billy Crystal) and James P. Sullivan (the voice of John Goodman) are partners in this venture – they work on the scare floor of Monsters, Inc. along with many other scarers and their assistants. Mike has the job of assisting Sully, the scarer, by swiping the day’s access card into their door-stand which causes a door to drop from the overhead conveyor line into the slot. Mike activates it, opens the door when the green light gives him the okay, and Sully steps into the human world and does

his stuff. Mike collects the screams into metal tanks which are stored until they are needed to create energy for the community.

There are two worlds in that movie – the monster world and the human world. Access is through two-dimensional doors where there is nothing on either side until the door is opened. And, we discover, the monsters are just as scared of being touched by the children as the children are of being scared by the monsters.

The entire film is based on there being this two-dimensional world where you must be in one or the other, there’s no in-between, no non-threatening interaction between the monster-realm and the human-realm. That is until the end of the movie when the monsters find out that there is a middle-world – the laughter of human children creates even more energy than the screams and finally the worlds can exist intertwined.

We live as if our world is like that of the movie, as if there is a clear distinction between here and there, yes and no, right and wrong. We live as if there is an “us” and a “them” – and nothing of any value in between. I find it to be a disturbing way to try and order my own life. Attempts at trying to categorize my life into tidy little sections are useless. Just when I’m convinced that I can live in this world over here, I find that one cannot separate from that world over there – whatever that here and there connotes. It’s “us” and other “us.”

So it is with that understanding of our world that we tend to read Matthew’s story of Jesus being challenged by the religious elite of his time. “Give me a coin,” says Jesus. “Whose head is on the coin,” he asks intriguingly since it is obvious who is on there. “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s ... And to God the things that are God’s.”

It’s dangerous to hear that in our modern context, in English, several degrees removed from the reality of how the original audience would have heard it. We hear it as cold observers from 2,000 years distant. We hear it as a one sentence statement that

perhaps leads us to believe it as evidence that there is this two-realm reality to existence. There is, on the one hand, that which belongs to the emperor, the world, the temporal, the earthly. Then there is that which belongs to God, the divine, the other-worldly, the heavenly. The temptation is to think and believe that Jesus is telling us that there are certain things that belong to Caesar but that there are also *other* things that belong to God – and that never the twain shall meet. Give the things that belong to the emperor to him, give the things that belong to God to God. As if there is the distinct separation between the profane of this world and the sacred of God's world.

But that's just not the reality of our faith. What Jesus has been teaching in Matthew's Gospel, if we have been paying attention, is that *all* belongs to God. Even that which is Caesar's belongs to God. This coin, that tax, that palace, those people – all belongs to God. If God created all that is and God is sovereign over all that is, than there can be nothing outside of God's realm. There can be no distinction between what is God's and what belongs to the world. There is no way to separate out what belongs to the world and give only that back to the world.

In Jewish religious thought, the predominant theological undercurrent into which Jesus was speaking in first century Palestine, foreign rulers had power over Israel only by permission from God. Tax may be paid to Caesar because it is by God's will that Caesar rules. So this is a silly question from Jesus and the crowd probably chuckled. Of course the coin belongs to Caesar. And when God chooses to liberate God's people, Caesar's power will avail him nothing.

That same basic rule should be the case for us today as well. If we believe the statement that God is sovereign over all, then there is no need to understand the world as two realms to which one can pay tribute separately. There simply is nothing outside of God's realm – even the powers that seem to rule this world cannot escape the rule of God. So give to the rulers of the world what is theirs. It's all God's in the final analysis.

One commentator summarizes it like this:

Taxing authority is only the tip of the iceberg respecting the power a state exercises over its citizens. Does that state have the right to invade privacy in matters not directly related to public safety? Can it legitimately define and enforce ethical standards in the areas of sexuality and reproduction? Modern Christians may find Jesus' epigram provides little help in dealing with such questions. Perhaps it will only be as a result of pondering deeply the second half of the epigram that we will know when, in God's name, we must surrender our docility and actively resist the power of the state. (Douglas Hare, *Matthew* in the *Interpretation* series)

One of the most fascinating revelations in this story is just how quickly these self-righteous religious leaders – the Pharisees – whip out a Roman coin. Right? Here they are in the Temple where there is to be no idol, no simulated representation of God. The Temple tax, to be paid by all Jews as part of their religious discipline, is paid to the Temple using specially minted coins – not Roman coins with the emperor's image placed as an idol on the obverse. Yet when Jesus asks for a coin, these religious elite whip out a denarius, a Roman coin, not the Jewish Temple coin. Interesting.

I imagine them pulling it out because they want to entrap Jesus – but then they have a “gotcha” look on their faces when they realize what they've done – revealed the emperor's image in the Temple.

In the US, the coins in our pockets make a moderate theological statement about who we are. “In God We Trust,” they say. And maybe “Liberty,” conjuring a sense that we are free because God allows us freedom and liberty. The inscription on the denarius

that they offer Jesus is not ambiguous or moderate – it is clearly offensive to the Jews. Tiberius Caesar, divine son of Augustus, the high priest. With that Roman coin in hand, one held a tangible tribute to this being who was considered God. Different than our coins, isn't it? This coin, denarius, is a religious statement in a person's hand.

And once again, we're tempted to believe there are two worlds in direct conflict. There is the world of the Temple and its coins and its self-righteous belief system and then there is Rome, the world of the emperor and of the denarius that represents it. And the Pharisees think they have Jesus in a corner. If he answers that it is lawful to pay the tax – in the emperor's world – he will be safe over there but he will be condemned by the Temple – the other world. If Jesus says that to even carry a Roman coin with the emperor's image is tantamount to idol worship, he might win in the Temple world but he reveals his hand to the oppressive empire and is risking be labeled a seditionist.

But that's not what he does. He flips the situation. There are not two worlds – there is only God's world and all that you see and touch and hear and smell and taste – it all belongs to God.

Have you ever given any thought to what God is telling us in the commandment, “you shall have no other gods before me”? (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7) God infers that there is more than one God, that there are multiple gods that we worship day-in and day-out. For we 21<sup>st</sup> Century Americans that means our things – cars, houses, electronic devices, whatever – those things are gods. Or we make gods out of our families, our jobs, our relationships – we worship them as gods and often put them before the very God that gives us everything. When we say something like “my children are more important to me than anything else,” we are creating an idol to be worshipped rather than hearing Jesus' reminder that to be faithful followers we leave behind family and fortune and focus only on God, capital G. Walk away from those lesser gods – first admit that they *are* gods – and then leave them behind to get your focus right.

And I suspect that's what Jesus is doing here in this story. The denarius and all that it stands for is not from some other world – it's in the world in which we live – and it has become and idolatized god for Rome, for some Jews, for the civilized world, and in some ways for us as well. It's not about world versus world – it's about getting focused on God and God's empire which is also in this world where Rome and other oppressive empires pretend to dominate.

That coin in the Pharisees hand is worth something only because the emperor says it is. The coins in your pocket and the bills in your wallet are worth something only because the Federal Reserve says they are. If the empire does not back them up, they're only metal and paper – they are simply symbols of whatever we believe their value is. God, on the other hand, is God – with intrinsic value or, if you will, invaluable. God is God. “You shall have no other gods before me.” No matter what other gods we worship, the requirement is that God is primary among them all.



Earlier this week I received an E-newsletter from The Beatitudes Society, a progressive Christian organization engaged in the work of justice, peace and compassion as it understands the Beatitudes of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The Rev. Anne S. Howard, its Executive Director, reflected this week on the Occupy Wall Street phenomenon that has gained momentum over these past few weeks.

I've been intrigued by the movement as it has evolved. I have driven past the Occupy Philadelphia group at City Hall several

times now but I haven't yet stopped in to see what's happening. And I offered last week that if anyone wants to respond to Arch Street UMC's call for assistance with its providing hospitality I have a list of items needed.

To me what has been the most interesting part of this is that politically conservative critics immediately jumped to the question, "What are their demands? What do they want?" But there are no demands – and I realized that that's exactly the point. People want to be heard and respected rather than used and discarded by the system in which we live. It's not about "Give us \$2 million dollars in our pension fund or we're here forever" or "Close down the stock market and give us all the proceeds." It is simply about presence – about being where God calls you to be speaking words of justice and compassion and peace as Jesus has taught us. Not that everyone involved is doing it for Jesus-reasons or that they are all Christian, but for those of us who are followers that needs to be our response to this whole thing.

Ann Howard in The Beatitudes Society newsletter wrote this:

I just met Nicholas, and I'd like to tell you a bit about him—it's a bad news and a good news story.

He's a brand new student at Harvard Divinity School, and he's a brand new Protest Chaplain.

He didn't plan to be a Protest Chaplain, but a few weeks ago, he and a group of fellow students went to Wall Street, wearing their albs (those white robes that acolytes wear) and carrying a handmade cardboard cross. They also carried handmade cardboard signs proclaiming "Blessed are the poor" and "Blessed are the peacemakers."

Nicholas and his friends went to Wall Street because they figured that's where the church should be.

But when they got there, they were met with some suspicion and surprise:

"People couldn't figure us out," Nicholas told

me. "Many thought we were there to convert them or to protest their protest. They couldn't believe we were there in solidarity."

That's the bad news in this: when the church shows up—quite literally—in the public square, folks think they are there to twist arms for Jesus, or else to side with "the establishment." That's how Christianity is known these days, sadly.

And there again is this dichotomy, people immediately assuming that there are two opposing worlds – that of God versus that of the world. "Give to the emperor what belongs to him and to God what is God's." As if this, Occupy Wall Street, is dealing with the concerns of the empire's world and the church needs to stay out of it.

Ann Howard continued:

But here's the good news: Nicholas and his friends represent a **new kind of Christianity**—actually, a very old kind of Christianity, the kind that Jesus and his friends practiced. This is the kind of Christianity, and the kind of public presence, that The Beatitudes Society works to promote. As one of Nicholas' colleagues blogged, the work of care and feeding and healing going on throughout the Occupy protests looks a lot like "the Way" of the early Christians described in the Book of Acts:

"...in the music, conversations, meetings and daily work that come with running a community, there is a profound sense of abundance. A delivery of dry blankets and towels is met with cheers. Trained medics volunteer their skills to treat injuries and illness. The food station is "loaves and fishes" in action: There is always more than enough to eat, and homeless folks eat side by side with lawyers and

students off of donated plates. There is always meaningful work to be done. It's not charity. It's cooperation. It's The Way, and it's happening right now. The Occupation is the church your church wants to be."

**"The church your church wants to be."** Despite what anyone might think about the meaning or the impact of the protests ("they're just kids," "it won't change anything") Nicholas and his friends are doing a pretty fine job of reminding us of the heart of Christianity: **commitment to the common good and hospitality to the stranger.**

The Protest Chaplains are doing **Beatitudes work** out there in the public square, and they are not only tending to the "urgency of now" but they are leading us into the future.

This is not only the church we **want** to be, this is the church we **need** to be.

Our work as followers of Jesus, as children of a compassionate God who loves and in whose image we are created, is to transcend that division between the empire-world and the supposedly separate God-world. There is no distinction. All that is is God's – including we have God's image stamped on our lives even deeper than any image on any coin of the realm.

Early this past week I spent time in Phoenix, AZ, with a collaborative organization between Methodists from the US and from Mexico – the Methodist Borders Mission Network (MNMN). For several years now they have focused on border issues that affect all of us – poverty, immigration, violence, fear, misconception. I was there to share with the group the grassroots, faith-based activist model of Heeding God's Call, the gun violence prevention movement that I have been involved in for 3 years now.

But while there I was introduced to the work of God's people in ways that I never experienced before. Rev. Max Cisneros is an 85

year old retired UM pastor, second generation Mexican-American, who travels into the desert of "human remains searches," recovering bodies or coyote-chewed bones of Mexicans who have attempted to cross the border but collapsed from hunger and thirst and heat and died out there. Wow. Humane Borders is an organization that maintains water stations in the desert – 50 gallon drums that mission teams refill periodically so that people at least have water to drink as they risk as they have to make this treacherous journey – a group which is hated and despised by anti-immigration groups like the Minute Men, a vigilante group which thinks it defends the border with intimidation and guns, who shoot holes or overturn the water drums.

Despite one's political opinion of the huge immigration issue which dominates American debates and news cycles – there more than here where we aren't impacted in a major, tangible way – despite the emotions the issue might raise within you – people who come across the desert do not deserve to die. People are people – God's people and God's people – and no fence or laws or policies or degradation takes that away from any of us. As followers of Jesus these folk that I met are doing what they believe God is calling them to do – when I was hungry you gave me food, when I was thirsty you gave me water, naked you gave me clothes, when I was sick or imprisoned you cared for me. I don't really care of the emperor's laws call him illegal – I don't care if the one whose face and value is based on the coin in my pocket calls her an invader – because the one whose image is on my heart reminds me that people are people and our business as followers is to love one another so I must do that at all costs.

There is not two completely distinct worlds and we need to begin living that way. All that is, belongs to God. All who are, belong to God. And we who are created in the image of God need to recognize that about ourselves and each other. It is the only way we can, with integrity, live out the Jesus message.

Amen.