

We resume our readings from the gospel of Matthew today. We have been reading through this gospel over the past couple of months. Today we hear more from the 22nd chapter.

By reading through the gospel we are beginning to see how Matthew records Jesus offering lots and lots of challenges to the religious leaders. Today we are going to hear an attempt by the religious leaders to push back against Jesus and try to trap him into an answer about paying taxes.

We hear a lot about taxes in our culture. Who should get tax breaks. What services should be cut or added to in the budget paid for by taxes. What is sound tax policy. We all have our opinions about taxes and whether they should go more toward social service agencies or more toward the military or whatever.

In this text we will hear that the Pharisees and the Herodians are banding together to ask Jesus a question about taxes. The only thing that Pharisees and Herodians have in common is a dislike for Jesus.

The Pharisees are Jewish religious leaders who are portrayed in scripture as having a very legalistic understanding of the Jewish faith. The Herodians are supporters of Herod Antipas who had been appointed by the Romans as the king of the Jews.

Pharisees and Herodians are similar to the divisions in this country around the 1760s and 1770s. In this country the Stamp Act was passed in 1765 and the Boston Tea Party broke out in 1773 as an act of protest against taxation without representation.

In the reading from the gospel this morning, the Romans were imposing taxes on the Jewish people of Israel in order to pay for the occupation by the Romans of Israel. Obviously, most all the Jews opposed these taxes being levied against them by their occupiers. The Pharisees were like the patriots in our country in the 1770s who were opposed to these taxes. The Herodians were like the loyalists in the 1770s who supported the occupation.

In this text we will hear about a coin being presented. This coin would have been considered idolatrous by the Jewish people because it would have contained the image of Caesar with the caption “The Divine Caesar.”

Jews considered this inscription on the Roman coins as breaking the first two of the Ten Commandments about having no other God and not worshipping false idols.

Read Matthew 22:15-22

The question that is asked of Jesus is a “gotcha” question. The Herodians and the Pharisees have banded together to try to trap Jesus into an answer. If Jesus answers that he does not support paying the taxes, then he would be accused of sedition or inciting hostility toward the state.

If Jesus states that he is in support of the taxes, then he would be accused by the Jews of breaking two of the Ten Commandments. So, either way Jesus is trapped. There is no right answer that will avoid getting him in trouble. But in his answer, Jesus proves once again that he cannot be manipulated by human greed.

Jesus asks his questioners to pull out a coin. He asks them what they see on that coin. What is on that coin is the head of Caesar and a description of him as God.

Is it appropriate to pay these taxes? Jesus responds, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s.” Jesus challenges his hearers to think critically about how they live out their Christian faith and citizenship.

This Tuesday marks a big anniversary for us protestants. On October 31st, 1517, 500 years ago, Martin Luther nailed to the door of the Whittenburg Castle Church his 95 Theses. His action of nailing his complaints to the door of the church is considered the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

Martin Luther was a Catholic monk and college professor who became more and more concerned by the abuses within the Catholic Church. He particularly was troubled by the selling of indulgences. Indulgences was the act by the church in which one had to make a financial contribution to have their sins forgiven.

Martin Luther posted on the doors of the church in Whittenburg his belief that forgiveness came from God's grace and not by our works or financial contributions. Martin Luther believed that we could ask for this forgiveness directly and not need the intermediary of church officials like a priest.

Others began to speak out and write as well about reforms in the church. In Geneva, Switzerland a French lawyer named John Calvin wrote these books. These books are called the confessions.

A preacher named John Knox who was a pastor in Scotland read Calvin's books. Knox and others eventually wrote a document called the Scots Confession which is in this book which we call our Book of Confessions. These documents, built upon the Bible, are the foundational documents for our branch of Christianity called the Presbyterian Church USA.

So how does Protestant Reformation history relate to our text today about paying taxes? Jesus makes it very clear that our faith should influence everything that we do. Our faith in Jesus Christ should guide how we spend our money.

Our faith in Jesus Christ should guide how we are a citizen of the United States or whatever country you consider your home. Our faith in Jesus Christ should be our guide within organized religion.

This text pushes us to examine three very important responsibilities that we have. What does it mean to be Christian and an American or whatever country you are a citizen of because we here at Allison Creek are not all American citizens? The second important responsibility that this text pushes us to examine is how we spend our money.

And the third important responsibility that this text pushes us to reflect upon is what does it mean to be a part of an organized religious body. In this text Jesus is able to mix religion, politics, and money all together. The three things we are told to not talk about.

But I am going to offer my reflections on all three of these areas as a model for your own reflections. The first is religion. These are my own personal reflections. I share them to not say that I expect you to be where I am but to offer an example of how this text impacts me.

What does it mean to me to be a pastor in the Presbyterian Church USA? For me it means that I accept the essential tenants of what we believe as Presbyterians. I trust our form of government. I accept and appreciate that we call men and women into all forms of ministry.

But it also means that there are parts of the PCUSA which I speak out on and challenge with a desire to lead us toward greater faithfulness to God. For me, I seek to challenge an institutional complacency that I find within our denomination that is more concerned with maintaining historical norms than being open to new inbreaking of God's Holy Spirit.

As a result, I am considered marginal by some within the establishment of the PCUSA because I ask lots of questions that make some people uncomfortable and they wished that I did not ask. I challenge assumptions which I think are dated. But I am guided by a belief that I am a follower of Jesus Christ first before I am a Presbyterian. As I share this, I am willing to stand corrected by others within my denomination.

What does it mean to me to be a Christian who is an American? Similar to my feelings about my denomination, I also seek to be faithful to Jesus Christ before my faithfulness to my country. I am proud of the ideals that I believe America stands for.

I am thankful that I can worship freely and that others are able to do the same. I am thankful for those who are willing to die to protect these ideals.

I am concerned, however, by the rise of a movement within our country toward a nationalism that appears more focused on protecting and restoring power held by a few homogeneous individuals rather than an inclusivity that welcomes all of God's children regardless of their skin color, accent, language spoken, how they worship, and who they love.

As a Christian first and American second, I feel it is my responsibility to speak out. As I share this, I am willing to stand corrected by others within my country. I know that my political opinions are challenged by many. But I also believe that in a healthy church we should encourage dialogue which welcomes various political opinions.

What does it mean to me to be a Christian and someone who has money to spend? It means that I should reflect on what I spend my money on and ask myself over and over if I am being faithful with what I purchase?

So, to challenge all of us to do that I have some sharpie pens up here. I am going to take one of the pens and take out my credit cards and my debit card. I am going to place a cross on my debit card and my credit cards. I am doing this to remind me to ask myself if I am spending this money in a way that is faithful to what I profess as a Christian.

In the words of Lois Pederson from the children's sermon last week, I am going to see this cross and then stop, think, and ponder if I am being a faithful Christian with my expense. These sharpies are up here if after worship you wish to do the same.

Look at your coins, dollar bills, and credit cards. Look at the US flag or whatever flag you accept as your flag. Look at your Bible.

I invite you to constantly ask yourself what it means to be a Christian first in relation to all of these other objects. AMEN.

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-Given: October 29, 2017 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)