

# *Christ and Caesar*

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October 19, 2014

Reading: Matthew 22:15-22

*22:15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.*

*22:16 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.*

*22:17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"*

*22:18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?*

*22:19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius.*

*22:20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?"*

*22:21 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."*

*22:22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.*

## I.

He was a short dark man, with the beginnings of a beard, come to the United States without his wife or young son, to study for a year. An Indian Christian, a Lutheran pastor, a deceptively quiet man, the son and grandson of outcastes, his name was Sundaram, and he was my friend. His way was unvarnished, and his friendship was real. He was gentle, affectionate, and extremely sharp in his thinking.

As we were entering the dining hall of the Divinity School one day, I introduced him to a few people at a table near the door. One of them started to test him a bit, talking patronizingly of the land of his birth, ignorant jabs, putting down a man the student didn't know. Joking in a way that wasn't funny. "You have a lot of gods in India, don't you? Do you believe in all those gods, Sundaram?"

Sundaram smiled gently. "Do you have a coin?" he asked. Someone pulled out a quarter, with George Washington's head in profile. Sundaram looked at it, saying "There are some words here, in the middle, But they are so small. I forgot my glasses...." Someone else leaned over his shoulder. "In God we trust." Sundaram smiled again, and held the coin up. "I am from India," he said, "I don't know much about your American ways. Is this one of your American gods? Perhaps you also have more than one." For a moment the table was silent. No one knew what to say.

## II.

An unlikely alliance of folk from rival factions got together to try to pin down Jesus one day. The folk from the synagogue movement, generally faithful observers of Torah who longed for the restoration of a free Israel, sent their students to join a group of folk from the Herod party. The Herodians were, to say the least, in cahoots with the Romans. Together they came to ask him an impossible question. After buttering him up a bit, they asked him whether it was lawful under the Sacred Law to pay taxes to the emperor in Rome, Caesar. IF he answered one way, he might please the independence minded group, but he would be turned over to the authorities for sedition! IF he went the other way he would alienate the religious folk who felt like Caesar's money was dirty and Cesar's army shouldn't be supported by upright folk.

Jesus asked for a coin, the coin the tax was paid in, a Roman coin with the picture of Caesar on one side, and his mother on the other. There were words there too, On the Mom side it said she was a goddess. And by Caesar's head was the word "Divine", the son of a god. "Whose image is on the coin, and whose inscription?" he asked this group who came from a tradition that allowed no graven images of God. The Greek word here is *eikon*—the word used for sacred images, or pictures in honor of the divine. "Whose Icon is on this coin?"

"Caesar's" they replied. "Give Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give God what belongs to God." And no one knew what to say. No one knew what to say because for them there was only one God they could worship. And it wasn't Caesar, or his Mom.

I have had a long journey with this story from scripture. Growing up I heard it used as a great metaphor for separation for church and state. It was a good interpretation, up to a point. And it generally went like this. We are called to be loyal citizens who pay our taxes and support the government. We owe the government its due! But God gets what is due to God. In religious matters the government should stay out of the business of telling us what to do.

Now I am not here to knock separation of church and state. But just stopping with that usual reading of this story fails to get to the bottom of what it is really about. We can't give Caesar the public realm and keep religion private, for matters of the inner soul. Not once we know what it says on that Roman coin. Because Caesar isn't God. We can't give Caesar our **reverence**! And once Sundaram has flipped a quarter back at us, and raised a fundamental question about the worship of money, and whether we have more than one God **in practice**, we need to take a good hard look at some questions.

Some of us around this room have been asking these hard questions about Christ and Caesar for quite a while around there! They are the kinds of questions first raised for many of us by the Vietnam War, and ever since in many ways: questions about what kind of power, what kind of abuse of power, what kind of claim to godlike authority over life and death, we can conscientiously support. Just whom do we serve in our lives—and can we, to pick up another phrase of Jesus, can we really serve two masters? It is a question of conscience.

Just in case you think the pastor is wandering off track into purely political questions let me assure you—this is a deeply spiritual question, rooted in the promises many of us make in baptism. For those of you who can remember your baptism, what was the one question you were

asked, before being plunged into the waters of death to an old life and rising to a new one?  
“Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your ....”

The word Lord means sovereign...and that means we have one ultimate authority, one God, one liberating savior. And so it is fair that we ask ourselves the hard questions about how we live, how we think, how we make our decisions, where we place our final trust, whose ways govern our loyalties. And no, we aren't off the hook if we were baptized as an infant and confirmed later. There was no half-way in the promises we made in confirmation, no Caesar in the questions the pastor or deacon asked, on behalf of Jesus. We may be subject to Caesar and citizens of a nation or empire. But first and last we belong to Christ!

### III.

Jesus doesn't give us an easy answer on this one. But when he holds up the coin and ask what is Caesar's due and what is God's, he gives us a question worth living with, a question worth dying with and being resurrected with. As Holly Nye, one of my pastor colleagues in bible study this past week put it, the question might be put like this: whose image, who's Icon, is imprinted on my life, on your life? Christ's or Caesar's? And to quote that unlikely Roman Catholic Saint from New York City, Dorothy Day, “The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us?”

Once we grasp the depth of Jesus question, we begin a process of deep self-examination, individually and in community. We start to ask soul-deep world-wide questions. It isn't about getting all the answers right, being perfect: it is about living with and by the queries that come from Christ. It is about living into what it means to bear the image of the prince of peace, the exemplar of Love, the teacher of nonviolent resistance, the proclaimer of release for the captives and healing for the broken. How is the image of Christ imprinted on our lives? To what extent is the image and reality of Christ's way the currency, the value we deal with and live by day to day, moment to moment? We begin a revolutionary journey, a revolution of the heart, a revolution that does start with each one of us, but cannot stop there.

Christ calls us to be part of a movement to bring about a new order, a new society, a new creation. It is a new reality, both for the heart and for our world. It includes the very personal decisions each of us makes in how we deal with people! Sometimes we need to say no to Caesar, to make tough choices of conscience, to part ways with the majority view, and speak up, or refuse to cooperate. Sometimes we need to say yes to Christ! In an oppressive setting, that can mean making the harder and more creative choices to do something positive.

### IV.

When this church started to speak up about civil rights for black folk in the 1960's, that was not the easy majority view! When we decided we needed to be public about being welcome, open and affirming to all people regardless of sexual orientation, that was not the majority view. My first time officiating at a same-sex wedding was long before the issue was being raised in the courts or legislature of this state! And at the second one, also two black women, just like the

first, they jumped the broom at the end of the service, memory of a time when the marriage of African-American people held in servitude were before God, and not recognized by the state.

These things, the individual decision to jump the broom and the community decision to recognize the full humanity of every being regardless of gender or orientation or race, these things do not come for us from convenient political ideologies. They come out of the spiritual process of living with the question: the question—whose image is it that is imprinted on our life, and if it be Christ's image, how shall we act?

There is no shortage of issues facing us with the tough choices today, no shortage of opportunities to reflect once more in spirit in body in heart, about what it means to follow Christ. Our American Caesar is not one person but a powerful empire nonetheless, an often faceless system that topples small countries and supports the Herods of today, dictators for whom human life is cheap, as routinely as Caesar of old. The School of the Americas has changed its name, but continues the work of training thugs as well as fine officers. Operating out of understandable fear, American missiles are killing civilians along with armies. American prisons have become an industry. Like any empire, this one has good things and bad about it, moments of great generosity and hope, and moments of great evil. People in other lands persist in looking to this nation for hope. And too often they see instead a police killing of a black man or a missile striking yet again; images of police brutality and well-meaning slaughter.

The good news is: we serve Christ. And Christ's way is a different way, a way of mercy and grace, a way of joy, of living openly, sharing abundantly, a way of risky behavior when justice and peace are on the line, a way of personal generosity, and readiness to speak clearly and lovingly for the sake of what is right and good and human! It is a disarming way, a loving way, but it is not a timid way.

Each of starts where we are. Each of us is invited to this revolution of the heart, not out of guilt, but out of forgiveness, not out of fear, but for the sake of love. Let us abandon the fear! Let us abandon the prejudice! Let us abandon the class we came from and the wealth we covet. Whose image is this, imprinted on our lives? It is Christ's. Let that image be our hope, our dream, our promise.