

The beauty (and brilliance) of our liturgy for me is that every time I participate in the service, something different grabs hold of my attention ~ a turn of phrase that I had not heard in the same way before, an image that resonates deep inside, or a carefully-crafted prayer that perfectly encapsulates the longings I feel but have yet to articulate for myself.

Last Sunday at the early service at the pavilion, I got a bit choked up right at the get-go. The attention-grabber this time was Collect for Purity that we pray at the beginning of every Eucharistic service: “Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid...”

What an awesome thing: for us to be completely transparent to God. Despite our attempts to project an image of ourselves that we find more palatable and appealing to those we want to impress, the masks we wear which embolden us to believe ourselves to be righteous and powerful and entitled and in control ... God sees right through all our acting, all our pretense, all our hypocrisy.

“Almighty God, to you all hearts **are** open, all desires **known**, and from you **no secrets** are hid...”

Jesus knows that there are things that we choose not to mention in prayer, hoping that if we don't bring them up, God won't notice them. Jesus knows that we are inclined to be self-seeking and self-serving. He knows we tend to be blind to the ways in which we marginalize others, are often less than honest, and can be manipulative. Yet Jesus is consistently gentle, truthful, compassionate, and clever as he pushes against these attitudes and behaviors and calls us back to our better selves.

This morning, Matthew describes how Jesus is confronted by two groups of Jews: the Pharisees (a Jewish sect that strictly observed God's Law) and the Herodians (different sect of Jews who felt a strong fidelity to King Herod and his dynasty). While not normally aligned with one another, they have teamed up to try to trick Jesus.

We encounter them here ~ as slick talkers, sweetly condescending as they pose their question. "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, teach with truth, and show deference to no one ... Tell us what *you* think: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor, or not?"

Keep in mind that the Pharisees, the religious purists, would object strongly to paying taxes to any pagan king ~ especially to a king who, like Tiberias Caesar, claimed to be of divine lineage. Meanwhile, the Herodians had a vested interest that secular taxes be paid. It seems Jesus is stuck, his hand forced to show partiality to one group or the other, and potentially at great personal cost. If Jesus says that it **is** lawful to pay taxes, the Pharisees would convict him of blasphemy. On the other hand, if Jesus responds that it **un**lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, the Herodians would condemn him as a treasonous revolutionary. Either way, they figure they've got him cornered.

But Jesus is one savvy dude ~ afterall, to him all hearts are open, all desires known, and from him no secrets are hid. He knows what they're up to and he calls them out.

Notice that he calls them hypocrites. In our day, we understand that word somewhat differently than how it was used in Greek society. A hypocrite was an actor: one who wore a false face, bore a false image, or one who presented themselves as someone they weren't. Jesus calls them out for their insincere intentions in asking him this question.

Jesus then makes a brilliant move by asking his audience for a Roman coin that would typically be paid as the tax: a denarius. Engraved on the front is the face of the emperor. But remember, to any good Jew, *the*

coin itself was abhorrent to God. “It violated the first commandment by showing deference to an emperor who deemed himself to have divine pretensions, and it violated the second commandment by bearing a graven image of this false god.”¹

Surprisingly, surrounded by this group who present themselves as having God’s Law as their highest concern, a denarius is readily presented. It’s subtle, but Jesus is gently subversive by calling into question the religious fidelity of these supposedly pious men. If they were as concerned about living out their faith as they are attempting to indicate, no one would have had a denarius in their possession to present.

Next, he holds up the coin and asks whose head is on it. (I need to note here that this is a poor translation ~ the Greek word here translated as “head” is *eikon*. A better translation might be “image” or “likeness”.) So to the more pointed question, ‘whose image/likeness does this coin bear?’ has an obvious answer.

Jesus responds that the coin is already the emperor’s—it came from him and his face stamped right on it—so give it to him. But notice what Jesus does *not* say. He does not verbally ask ‘Who or what bears God’s image and is created for God’s purposes?’ But that question hangs in the air, and the Pharisees and Herodians wander off in amazement.

The central definitive characteristic of humanity, what it is that makes us different from the rest of creation, is that we are created in the image of God. We are told in Genesis that God says, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness ...” It goes on to say, “so God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them.”²

¹ James Liggett

² Genesis 1:26-27

And let's not forget, at our baptism we are further marked with the sign of the cross. Our image and likeness, and what is written upon us, is that of God's own self and our pledge of fidelity. To whom, then, do we belong? Where shall we place our allegiance?

This question of our ultimate loyalty and our deepest allegiances is what Jesus is really talking about as he deals with the plots and the traps of his enemies. Our Lord is saying that what belongs to God is nothing other than we ourselves. There is no higher claim upon us. Our lives are God's, and all that we do is the response of our loyalty. All competing claims on our lives and for our allegiance are to be evaluated and understood in the light of whose we are, and whose image we bear. All our pretense, all our hypocrisy, all our self-service is for naught.

What can this mean in these hard days when so many families and communities are splintering over political and cultural differences that seem unbridgeable? When a scorched-earth, ideology-driven, "the end justifies the means" divisiveness reigns within American Christendom? The tax question seems so black and white compared to all the grey we must navigate.

As we read the Gospels, we "don't see a Jesus who ever cares more about the end than the means. If anything, the one who calls himself *'the way, the truth and the life'* understands that the ways we go about achieving our goals—the language we use or abuse, the stories we honor or silence, the people we protect or oppress, the sins we confess or indulge, the truths we proclaim or deny—make all the difference in the world."³

Figuring out taxes is the easy part. What's much harder is living out our political convictions with a Christlike humility, with a compassion that embraces our political other as a brother or sister. But if we really belong to God, if we really are fashioned in God's image, then we need to practice our faith and our participation in the governance of

³ Debie Thomas

our communities in ways that reflect who God is—whether we like how the politics are playing out in the world around us or not.

So yes, by all means give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor. But remember that our first loyalty is to a power that will remain long after earthly empires rise and fall. Our first and highest allegiance is to love God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind. And the second is like it: love one another as God loves us.

And no, this drama does not answer all our questions about what it means to be both a citizen in society and a Christian. It does not resolve every dilemma about obedience and patriotism and resistance. But it does make clear what questions should lead our responses: Whose image do we bear, and to whom do we pledge our fealty?

Let us pray: Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.