

University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
Rev. Canon Rosa Lee Harden
October 28, 2012

Please stand as you are able for the reading of the Gospel

A reading from the Holy Gospel of Matthew

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 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." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Here ends the reading of the Gospel.

I'm pretty sure I know why I was invited to preach here today. It was because I'm trying to do that isn't usually done. And what I am trying to do is to start a very intentional conversation in the church about money.

I live and work in both San Francisco and Asheville, NC. In San Francisco I produce a conference for the secular world – called SOCAP – about impact investing, social entrepreneurship, where we ask questions about money and meaning.

And in Asheville, I work for the Episcopal Cathedral of All Souls where I carry the odd title of Canon for Money and Meaning. What that means (at least what it means to me) is that am charged with trying to preach and teach in a way that helps all of us at All Souls better make the connection between money and our faith.

So when Joanne and I talked a few weeks ago about my preaching here, it seemed obvious this text was a perfect one for me to use. The one we think of usually as referring to our money. The more modern translation I read this morning says, "give to the emperor what is his". But the King James says: "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesars".

On the surface, it appears that the question being asked is: Where does our money go? Do we have to give it to the government, or do we get to keep it?

Odd isn't it? Some questions just never go away ...

For as I was reading and researching this week trying to decide where this sermon might end up, is it any surprise that all I could hear was our current political debate?

A debate out in the public. One side trying to trick the other. While this exchange wasn't televised, the stakes were pretty high. And with Jesus' popularity, and his disruption of the norm that was going on here toward the end of his life, you can be quite sure that more than a few folks had tuned in, were watching, wondering how it was going to turn out.

As Palestine is today, first century Judea was an extremely politically charged place. If it is possible, there were even more factions than we have in our politics here in the US. In today's passage we deal with two of those Judean sects: the Pharisees and the Herodians. And it is broadly known that they hated each other.

The Herodians followed Herod and supported paying the taxes that Herod demanded.

The Pharisees were religious legalists and looked down on anything that compromised their version of what they believed. They railed against the Roman occupation and felt that paying taxes to Rome was a religious hypocrisy.

As I studied this passage I could hear our own arguments from earlier in the fall around the political conventions.

- Put the word "God" in your party platform and liberals will say you are pandering.
- Leave the word out, and the conservatives brand you as a "godless heathen".
- Suggest we have a public mandate for healthcare ... socialism!
- Take away Medicare and you are un-American!

Yet unlike our political climate, while the Pharisees and the Herodians disagreed about most things, they still had one thing in common. As much as they hated each other, they hated one thing more, and that was Jesus.

It is hard to imagine them getting together on anything, yet this passage tells us that they came together and said, "We can trick him on this. Let's ask him this one very specific question: "Tell us, then, what do you think, Jesus. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" The Pharisees say, "If he says that it isn't lawful then you Herodians can arrest him for sedition! If he says we SHOULD pay taxes, then we will know he is a traitor to OUR beliefs and WE can denounce

him as a traitor to our faith in God. Either way Jesus is trapped! We've got him."

They are sure they have their own brand of the 'gotcha' moment. And with that, they can finally discredit this troublemaker.

All of it (except the part about the two warring factions working together) sounds pretty familiar, doesn't it!?

So they ask their question: Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?

And Jesus, in return, asks them something. A simple question: Can somebody show me one of the coins you use to pay taxes?

They bring him one, and Jesus has his 'gotcha' moment right back. Whose image is on this coin? Jesus asks.

As you look at the rules they were operating with in that day and time, you can almost feel the Pharisees and the Herodians cringe. They know their coins are stamped with Caesar's image. And they are in the bounds of the temple where no images of Caesar – no other God – is allowed. The coin they produce has a graven image.

There is some evidence to suggest that the most devout Judeans either carried no coins of the realm at all. Or when they did, the coins they carried into the temple had the image of Caesar over stamped with the subversive symbol of a palm branch. But these guys apparently produce plain ole drachmas, with Caesar right there for all to see, right there in the temple.

"Well, well, well ... what do we have here? Whose head is this," Jesus asks, "and whose title?" 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."

When you hear that from Jesus, it seems perfectly clear. Our passage says that those hearing his words were amazed. And while it is a nice 'gotcha' it doesn't quite hit the amazing button for me. Until I again go to THEIR context.

These are devout Jews. They know their scripture. Jesus asks them: Whose image is on the coin? This coin was created in WHOSE image? And there is little doubt in my mind. These men, who had studied scripture deeply - probably in that same temple - heard the unasked question, too. Whose image is stamped on you?

This coin may have Caesar's image on it. But you, you were created in God's image. God is stamped on YOU.

That's the amazing part.

Our choice, as always from the very beginning, as laid out to us even in the

earliest Genesis accounts is this: Do we imitate the Creator or creature, God or Caesar? On which ideal do we base our lives? When put in its starkest, rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's becomes turning to the idolatry of trusting in our government's coin, or trusting in money, to bring satisfaction to our lives. And instead we are invited to render to God what is God's. To put our selves - our very being - into God's care.

The thing I fear the most these days for our country is that I believe we think that because we have stamped on our coinage "In God We Trust," that printing it there makes it true. But, as seen in our story from Jesus' time, just because we stamp something on the coin of the land does not make it true. Putting Caesar's image on the coins did not make the Judeans loyal to Caesar. And putting "In God We Trust" on our coins can be just as meaningless.

At worst, it is political jingoism, meant to send a signal of what we want others to believe. And at best, when we actually pay attention to those words on our dollar bills, that phrase might serve as a reminder, as we spend those bills, that whatever it is that we are about to purchase is not the solution to our - or to the world's - deepest, problems. It is in God that we put our trust.

In an editorial earlier this month in *Christian Century**, the question was posed about giving and receiving. As in: who are the job creators and who are the ones living on the dole? The editors suggested that dividing the world into makers and takers - while appealing - is a false dichotomy. In that splitting of who we are we forget that we were all created in God's image. And to the point, we ignore the truth that our God chose to be revealed in the Trinity. In relationship.

When we are created in God's image we also were created as interrelated, as dependent on each other.

Christian Century continues: "In a hugely interdependent society such as ours, the genuine moral and political question is not: Who is giving more and who is receiving more at this moment? But: Does the use of tax dollars serve the common good?"

Using catholic social teaching and John Paul II's definition: "The common good comprises the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily."

Each time we come to this table, each time we stand together in this place in imitation of Christ's self-giving, we stand in a place that proclaims that common good.

We are invited to no longer see our own individual image - MY picture on the coin. What do I want? What will serve ME best? Instead, as we come here together, we are invited to see ourselves as a part of Christ's self-giving story.

As we come to this table today, as we share in the bread broken for us all, how do we see our lives as created in the image of the one who gave his life for us?

How might we ask that question anew?
What image is stamped on your coin?
What do our coins tell us?
What does my coin ask me?

What does yours?

Amen.

*All citations from *Christian Century*, from an editorial entitled *Giving and receiving*, October 1, 2012.