

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost - A Proper 24 (2026)

Exodus 33:12-23

Psalm 99

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

“Show me the coin used for the tax.... “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.” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Pharisees have had a rough week. Jesus, this rabble-rousing miracle worker, exorciser of demons, spiritual teacher, and proclaimer of some sort of arriving kingdom, has been in Jerusalem for several days, showing up on what we celebrate as Palm Sunday to the shouts of “Hosanna to the Son of David” and people all over the city asking, “Who is this?” Upon entering the Temple grounds, Jesus becomes angry with what he sees happening: the ‘business’ of selling sacrificial offerings, not wrong in and of itself, but taking advantage of the people who need to utilize the money changers’ and animal sellers’ services. In response, Jesus makes a scene and turns over the tables of these ‘merchants,’ exclaiming, “It is written, my house will be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves.” In addition, Jesus healed the blind and the lame who came to him, which increased the Pharisees’ indignation and frustration.

Several more encounters between the religious leaders and Jesus take place where they attempt to trap Jesus into saying or doing something that will bolster their case either by turning the people against him or by forcing the hand of the Roman authorities to do something with him. The Pharisees have been relentless in their quest to belittle or make Jesus irrelevant, and each encounter only increases their frustration and exposes their hypocrisy.

In today’s account, Matthew tells us that the Pharisees sent their disciples to test Jesus on a highly contentious issue between the people and the empire: the lawful payment of the ‘head’ or ‘census’ tax. This was a tax that the empire collected

‘because they could’ as another form of oppression and a way of increasing the treasury.

The senior Pharisees have been on the short end of the stick in their encounters with Jesus, so they send in their underlings, Pharisees-in-training, to do their work. If the junior Pharisees trapped Jesus with their seemingly brilliant question, which they presumed required either a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer, they would obviously enhance their standing among the religious group; if they failed, the senior religious leaders would gain political cover. Doing their best at offering disingenuous respect for Jesus’ status, they ask, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Jesus responded with one of his own questions, a typical strategy he employed. “Whose head is this, and whose title?” and they answered that the image was that of the emperor. In response, Jesus gives one of Scripture’s most memorable lines: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Matthew tells us that the religious leaders were amazed, left him, and went away.

This encounter has so much to unpack that it would be better served in a Bible study session. So today, I’m going to offer some thoughts on two aspects: identity’ and ‘integration.’

The denarius in today’s reading showed the emperor’s image on one side and an inscription on the other that read, ‘Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of divine Augustus.’ The denarius was a coin of the realm used for transactions. Jewish zealots, those devout Jews who maintained an ongoing guerrilla warfare campaign against the empire, refused to even carry the coin on them. It was bad enough that the Jewish population had to pay the ‘head’ tax as it was, but to have to pay it with coinage that reflected Caesar Augustus as a divine being, obviously against the one true God of the people, made matters all the worse. If Jesus had said the payment of the tax was unlawful, he’d be a hero with the crowd while letting the Pharisees report to the Roman authorities that Jesus was spreading sedition. If he said it was lawful, the crowd would turn away, and the Pharisees would keep their status as the religious elite. Yet Jesus responds that some things belong to this world, symbolized by the emperor’s image on the coin. It was ‘his’ coin, ‘his’ realm, so act accordingly. Jesus was not trying to set up a secondary kingdom against the

Romans. Rather, he was teaching of the kingdom that *wasn't of this world*, a kingdom that superseded this earthly realm, a kingdom with a different image, that of the one true and living God. The question he poses to us all is: whose kingdom is stamped on us, the world's or God's?

The Bible teaches that 'we'/'all' are made in the image and likeness of God. As such, we carry a divine presence within us, and we are precious to him. From the very beginning, as part of his creation, we have been blessed and charged to carefully steward all that he has entrusted to us. At the end of the sixth day, the writer of Genesis says that God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was *very good*. God designed and approved us as 'very good.' As the denarius 'belonged' to the emperor, we belong to God. If Jesus told the Pharisaical disciples to act accordingly when paying the tax, we have an even greater duty to 'act accordingly' as people who belong to God. Since God is love, we are to love. As God is patient, we are to be patient. As God is compassionate, we are to be compassionate. As God is a source of hope, we are to be a source of hope. As God is merciful, forgiving, and generous, we are to be merciful, forgiving, and generous.

This 'image stamping' is even more evident in the ritual of baptism. In the baptismal rite we use in the church, the priest symbolizes our belonging to God with the comforting and encouraging words, 'You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever.' WE BELONG TO CHRIST! As such, we have been called to a new life, lived in the tension of a broken world filled with sin, darkness, hopelessness, and violence. None of this worldly brokenness, however, diminishes the light of Christ within us. We have been 'sealed' and 'marked' by the God who loves us and delights in us. How cool is that!??

Along with 'identity', the other 'i' word, integration', is also a theme in today's reading. The Pharisees asked Jesus a question crafted to elicit a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Yet Jesus turns the question into an opportunity to dismantle the dual nature of their thinking, the idea that everything can be put into 'yes' or 'no' boxes. In his response, Jesus offers an integrated approach that recognizes we live in a 'both/and' world. "Give to the emperor," he said, "the things of the emperor, *and*

to God the things that are God's." A world of 'both/and' can exist even when some questions require 'yes/no' answers.

I think Jesus is calling us out of the dual nature of how many of us live. I know I have gotten better at this over time, but for a long period of time I lived a compartmentalized life. I had my 'work' life, my 'family' life, my 'church' life, and my 'worldly' life, which included politics, economics, recreation, and time with my friends. While I have been a 'churchgoer' my whole life, my life wasn't integrated; it was multiple silos. There was no cohesion between who I was as a Christian and how I lived my 'multiple' lives. Things have certainly changed, and now, by God's mercy and grace, I tend to see things more holistically.

When we live bifurcated lives, our loyalties are splintered. We find ourselves attempting to serve two or more masters, those loyalties and priorities that demand our time and effort. Jesus makes it simple: "You cannot serve two masters: for either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to one and despise the other." The apostle Paul calls this way of living 'double-minded.' In essence, living a life devoted to whom we are sealed and marked, and in whose image we are stamped, requires us to reorganize our lives and priorities, not necessarily eliminating the things we enjoy and treasure, but putting them in their proper place in relation to our relationship with God.

Dear friends, life is nuanced and complicated. It is not lived in a 'black and white' or 'yes and no' vacuum. That would be way too simplistic, and it wouldn't be a life worth living. We have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. With this at our core, we can live knowing that certain things belong to the emperor, while *we belong to God*. Now *that* is a life worth living!!