

Ken Thomas at University Hill Congregation
Sunday, October 16, 2011

Matthew is about righteousness, to live as the righteous. But let's first go for a walk together to the temple this morning. Big crowds, lots of people going into and out of the temple. Jews have come from all over the diaspora for passover. A babble of voices, there lots of Greek and Aramaic, perhaps Egyptian, Syrian dialects. It smells like there are livestock pens nearby. Near the entrance of the temple there is a group of people together in one spot, listening to a speaker. You might recognize him, or you ask about him, and some one says - "He's that radical from Galilee that caused the riot yesterday." So you stop to listen, but not too close, you don't want to get caught in another riot. Then these other guys come. It looks like Hare Krishnas in the company of under cover cops. Well maybe they don't. But that would be about as suspicious as Pharisees in the company of Herodians, and maybe they do, because Pharisees didn't actually have disciples and we have no idea who the Herodians were, except to assume they were connected in some way to Herod. In which case the Pharisees wouldn't normally be caught dead with them. So we really aren't sure what they looked like. So as you watch, they approach this teacher, and somebody butters him up and then asks him a question about taxes. And then the guy gets mad and calls them hypocrites and asks to see the coin used to pay the tax. So they show him one and he asks whose image is on it, which you think is a really dumb question, because everyone already knows that. Right? But they tell him Caesar's, and then he tells them to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's; which strikes you as quite clever, but really not much of an answer. But the Hare

Krishnas and the cops stare at the ground for a minute and then at each other and then they leave. And right after that you go on your way into the temple, with the crowds and the smells and the noise. And as you walk along you are smiling at the teacher's clever move, and absently wonder what is the difference between what is Caesar's and what is God's. And because you are a devout Jew you know the answer immediately - everything. Now I could stop right there and sit down, but I am supposed to preach for 20 minutes, so we will soldier on.

This is one of those stories which appears in quite similar form in all three synoptic gospels, Mark, Luke and Matthew, but with some subtle shifts. In Matthew, this confrontation follows the story of the cleansing of the temple and several parables. Jesus has clearly set himself against the temple authorities. In Matthew, the Greek word translated by the NRSV as tax is associated with a poll tax, a tax levied in equal amounts on all citizens, regardless of ability to pay; but in Luke the Greek word is different and refers to tribute. In either case this is not the usual income taxes you pay to your local government, it is a Roman tax.

Much has been made in some circles of the partnership between the Pharisees and supporters of Herod, assuming that is who the Herodians are. These two groups are really quite opposed to each other so they make strange bedfellows in this story. But the purpose is clear. The question is a trap and if Jesus says no, it is unlawful to pay the tax, then the Herodians can move immediately to have him arrested for sedition. If he says yes, then he will alienate many of the people. But he neatly slips out of the trap and turns the situation against his enemies.

Great energy also has been extended trying to turn these few words into a great exposition on the relationship between modern church and

state, and the duties and obligations of citizens. Indeed it is alleged that Jesus is affirming you should pay your taxes, and be obedient to the state in all other things as well. Barth, in Church and State, makes short work of that. Our modern sense of church and state, and the separation between the two didn't even exist in the first century. Jesus did not come to the temple to talk about church and state. And a key thing to note about this answer is that it is really no answer at all. And why should it be? Jesus makes very clear at the outset - "I know what you are up to, and it's not going to work."

There is an interesting kind of sidebar aspect to this story which at least one commentator I found has noted, regarding ego, and the lack thereof. I don't know about any of you, but I have been there with Jesus, although under different circumstances.

I have been approached in similar ways. We know you are the resident expert in these things, Ken, so tell us; we want your advice on this Ken, because we really value your opinion; basically, we are coming to you for your opinion because we think you are so smart. Well, now, I am old and jaded enough to duck and run when I hear that crap, but it wasn't always so. After all, if these fine people have sought you out because they think so highly of your knowledge and wisdom, you really are obliged, aren't you, to give them the full benefit of your great expertise on the matter, all the while, of course, protesting your humility. And before I know it, I have talked myself into more boxes than I can ever explain my way out of.

Jesus has no such problem. He sees through the flattery immediately and names the situation for what it is. The flatterers are hypocrites and the question is a trap. The rest is a clever escape from the trap, and it is likely

wise not to read too much more into it than that, but why spoil the theologians' fun.

Many commentators have made much about the fact that either the Pharisees or Herodians had the coins in their possession in the temple, so as soon as they produce the coin they are demonstrating they have brought foreign images into the temple and alienate themselves from the people. But the text doesn't actually say that. It says they brought him a denarius, no indication of where they got it or how long it took. But that is not the point of the story. It is not about the image on the coin or who possesses them, nor about coins in the temple. People travelled from all over the region to come to passover, and depending on where they travelled, they may have used Roman coins. That's why they had moneychangers. Jesus had already driven them out, but you can be sure they were back the next day. The place was full of Roman coins.

But it begs the question, doesn't it. What is God's? What is the emperors? We live in a time of empire - the American empire, multinational corporate empires, which is not unusual. There is always an empire rising, thriving or declining. And empires are not all bad. The Romans built roads, aqueducts and public buildings. They protected the frontiers of the empire and kept the various parties within the empire behaving themselves. There was relative peace if you paid your taxes and did your duty. They kept the pirates off the sea lanes and even moderated the work of the bandits on the roads, which enabled safe travel for people and goods. If you want the benefits of that system, then of course you should contribute to its operation and maintenance.

So the question is a legitimate one. It is a dilemma for the faithful Jew - how do I be faithful to Torah and still live under Rome? The role of

Roman occupation is in some sense ambiguous - the land belongs to God and the Romans are usurpers, yet traditional Jewish thought was that foreign kings could rule over them only if it was the will of God. And it was fine for Jesus and his band of itinerant disciples to be clever about it. But how could you function - raise a family, make a home, if you did not participate at some level in the economy, and that meant dealing at some level with structures of the empire.

The Hermeneia commentary emphasizes that we are not looking at equal injunctions here. Jesus is in fact simply telling the Pharisees and Herodians to do what they are already doing anyway. In effect - "If you are going to carry around Roman coins, then by all means, give them back to the Romans." But that is not on the same level as giving to God's what is God's. That is of course, much more about spiritual things.

But John Howard Yoder, disputes the Hermeneia approach. In the Politics of Jesus, he suggests the foes of Jesus would hardly have thought the question a trap if they believed Jesus was not political and only interested in spiritual things. They were expecting him to say something that could be used against him. Yoder goes on to say - "the attribution to Caesar Caesar's things and to God God's things, points to demands or prerogatives that somehow overlap or compete, needing to be disentangled. What is Caesar's and what is God's are not on different levels, so as never to clash, they are in the same arena."

Now hey - I am a self-made man, right? I pulled myself up by my bootstraps, overcame obstacles and made something of myself. Actually I am here today by the grace of God and nothing less than the grace of God, and nothing I achieved and nothing I have so-called earned is anything less

than God's. So I tend to side with Yoder on this. Everything I have comes from God.

Paul had an ambiguous relationship to the empire. He used its structures, the influence of the patronage system, the homes of wealthy patrons, the roads and sea lanes protected by Roman might, to spread his message and yet he was clear that the empire was passing away. He understood he was using the resources of the empire to hasten its demise. And in the midst of using those structures he insisted that life for the Christian was transformed, and relationships amongst the faithful and the faithful' relationships to the rest of the world were transformed in Christ.

That leads to one more point I want to make, one that I think is especially critical when people try to reduce this story to one of church and state, or to spiritualize it. I have a limited number of denarii, and frankly, I don't want to give them to either Caesar or God. I have much better, self indulgent things I can do with my denarii. Fred Hare reminds us - "If Caesar wants a few denarii give them gladly, because giving them up will remind you that a person's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions but in living according to the will of God."

How to deal with Empire was a dilemma for first century Jews. But this is now, and in one sense the only thing that really has changed for us is the location of the Imperial capital. And the protestors have got it right, it is Wall Street not Washington. But what has dramatically changed in two thousand years is the technology and tactics of the Caesars. The empire that surrounds us and sucks the life out of us is the one that bombards us with the ethos of self-indulgence. Minimize your taxes, forget church, and go golfing, preferably in the biggest SUV you can buy.

We are stuck in the real world, and we serve in the real world. We meet God in the real world and it is a messy place with empire's sticky tentacles reaching into almost every stitch in the fabric of our society. We can't avoid giving to Caesar what the economic system requires of us to make our way as responsible citizens in a complex world. But Christ calls us to make faithful decisions about how we participate and how we don't, how we use our resources, who we vote for, where and how we travel, and a whole range of other decisions, and Christ not only points the way, but in the Spirit gives us the grace and strength to stand in the tension and ambiguity of being faithful in our complex world

Paul had it right. The church really only has one mission - to transform lives. God's kingdom is the society of those living transformed lives. We don't bring God's kingdom near by changing structures in a broken world, but by changing lives, one at a time, and the key to that is how do we live our own. We don't make members we call, transform and equip disciples. But it is not easy.

As I work with the churches in this area I see the pain and confusion of faithful people who are struggling with serious questions. And I have lived with the same pain back home in Winnipeg. What do we do with our old buildings? Well just sell them. Not so easy - these are neighbourhood churches, many people walk to church, and the buildings have become key centres for the neighbourhoods. Do we abandon all that, abandon the neighborhoods, is that faithful? Congregations have existed for generations and have built identities. How do we give to God what is God's, if what God wants us to let go of is our unique identity as congregations? Why are we even confronting these questions now? Because the forces of secular empires have changed the society around us and we have been slow to

adapt. So how do we remain relevant when the world is changing, and still not let our agenda be driven by the empires driving the changes, remaining faithful and authentic while adapting to a new order? Nothing new here for the church. That is what Jesus was doing and that is why the established order was out to get him.

It has been really amazing to watch the spontaneous uprisings from Syria to Wall Street. The old order is in trouble all over. We are surrounded by empire, and we have been driven into the wilderness. Fortunately, we are God's people, and we can as faithful people, trust that the Lord is with us, even in the wilderness.

I am reminded of the civil rights movement which did not bring down an empire, but it sure was responsible for some big changes in the right direction. They marched to a song - We Shall Overcome. Most people think the important words in that song, the ones that gave hope and sustained, were the words "We shall overcome some day." I beg to differ. I think the words that mattered, the words that sustained, the words that kept them marching and empowered the powerless, were the words "Deep in my heart, I do believe."

And the world needs to know, it needs to see that deep in your heart you believe. We are blessed to live in interesting times. The Spirit is loose, Praise be to God. The Spirit is loose.
Amen.