

10.22.2017

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Baptism of Henry Ledford)
Matthew 22:34-46

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I can just picture it now. All those smug Pharisees, huddled together, scratching their heads how to get rid of Jesus for good. Each one thinking he's so clever, trying to outdo the others. I'm imagining a light bulb going on for one of them—he looks like a Zeke to me. All of a sudden, Zeke nudges the guy next to him in the ribs and says, "Watch and learn, boys!" Head held high, walking tall, he marches up to Jesus.

Out of Zeke's mouth spills pure unabashed flattery. "Hey Teach," he says with honeyed tones, "everyone can see you're true-blue—don't care what anybody thinks. So help us settle a little matter, won'tcha. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" He says it with those fluttering eyelashes, fingertips tapping together, and that Cheshire cat grin. And for a very brief moment it looks like ol' Zeke's got the Messiah stumped. He must've felt so proud of himself, like whoever it was who first asked, "So if God's so all-powerful, can he make a rock so heavy He can't lift it?" At first it seems as if Jesus is trapped—Catch 22—He's wrong no matter what He says.

On the one hand, if Jesus says yes, He's in trouble. If Jesus says, "Oh yeah, of course, you pay those taxes to Caesar!" He's an idolater. See, back in the year 6 B.C., when the Roman government began to occupy Palestine, it imposed a tax on every adult—both men and women. It was called the "census tax," and it cost them a whole denarius, about a day's pay if you were working minimum wage. Not only was this tax seen by the Jews as adding insult to injury—after all, it was bad enough that their God-given fatherland was now under Roman occupation. But to the Jews it was idol-worship since after Julius Caesar, Roman rulers were ascribed some sort of divine status and were said to actually become gods upon death—Emperor Vespasian's last words were, "Oh dear, I think I'm becoming a god." And so, since the census tax went straight to Caesar's coffers back in Rome, the Jews saw it as an offering made to Caesar, an act of disloyalty toward the one true God. So, if Jesus were to instruct His people to pay their taxes, chances are He could've been stoned on the spot for idolatry.

But, on the other hand, if Jesus says no to their question, He's still in trouble—this time with Caesar himself. If Jesus says, "Pssh, c'mon guys, keep your hard-earned money. Don't waste it on these Romans," then Jesus would be a traitor and that "hour" He's always saying is not yet come would've come pretty quick. See, tax revolts were dealt with harshly. During Jesus' boyhood years even there was a large-scale one that was squashed brutally by the Romans. The Pax Romana—peace in the empire—was one of the hallmarks of Roman rule, and they were determined to keep that peace at any cost. If ever there was a whiff of insurrection or treachery, then the Romans would swoop in and nip it in the bud before it got out of control. Instead of the innocent death Jesus did have—where not even Pontius Pilate could find fault with Him—Jesus would've received capital punishment for treason.

Now, let's get back to our story. It's the moment when it looks like Zeke here has bested Jesus. How will Jesus respond to Zeke's question, especially if He can't say yes and he can't say no? I mean, He doesn't want to be an idolater, but He doesn't want to be a traitor either. Well, what else would a rabbi do but answer the question with another question! So, Jesus turns it back on Zeke. Glancing around He says, "Hey, anyone have a denarius I can borrow?" (Interesting how Jesus doesn't keep any change on His person). Someone flips Him a coin and Jesus asks, "So, whose likeness and inscription is this anyway?" And all in unison say, "Caesar, of course." And that inscription, well, everyone knows it goes something like this—"Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest."

And with this, Jesus quickly gains the upper hand. First of all, these law-abiding Pharisees all know that the First Commandment forbids graven images. And what's that on the coin—Caesar's own idolatrous mug, with that blasphemous inscription. Yet, ironically who does Jesus get one of these coins from—none other than one of them! Here these Pharisees are, walking around all high and mighty, when all this time they've been filling their change purses with idols.

But here's the real punchline. Jesus really pulls the rug out from under them with this—"Render to Caesar what is Caesar's," He says, "and to God the things that are God's." The word used here—"render"—means to give back, as in paying off a debt. Simply put, if it belongs to Caesar, give it back to him. It's as if Jesus is shrugging His shoulders, saying jokingly, "It's only money—who needs it! If Caesar loves the stuff so much he'll even stick his face on it, let 'em have it. . . But give to God what is God's." And there, it says, He left them speechless.

This past week these words have been ringing in my ears—"Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

"Daddy, pick me up," my daughter begs.

"Honey, when are you coming home?" my wife calls.

"Pastor, something's come up," one of you says, "d'you have a second to talk?"

The mechanic demands, "That'll be \$58.79."

The guy on the street rattles his cup, "Got any change, Mister?"

With all the pulls on us from so many different directions, it really makes you wonder. Who gets my time? Who gets my attention? Who gets my loyalty? Who gets me—yeah—who gets me?

And while those demands come and go, there are even more pressing matters. For example, every morning when I get out of bed, I ask the same question—"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest one of all?" And each time, the mirror gives me the same answer—it ain't me! Even at thirty-four, I'm already starting to show signs of wear. It's in my eyes—not the joy of innocence anymore, but there's a sort of sadness now. And my once rich thick mane is going grey. And when it comes to my baby face, creases and wrinkles are setting in.

Y'know, that sadness in my eyes comes from all my regrets. Those grey hairs are a reminder that my days are numbered. And those lines on my face come from the expression of fear I always wear—fear of what tomorrow holds, fear of what lies in the future, fear of how I'll spend eternity. Simply put—it's sin, it's death, it's hell. Ultimately, they lay claim to me. They've got me in the palm of their hand, and one day it's to them I'll have to answer. Maybe if you own a mirror yourself, you know just what I'm talking about. And sadly, as hard as it is to admit, things are no different for this sweet baby boy right here. At least it sure looked that way . . . until just moments ago.

See, mirror, mirror in the water, who is this boy's heavenly Father? Those of us up here—Henry, and Mommy and Daddy Ledford, us Millers the sponsors—we all got a good look at just who he really is, because God gave us a better look at whose he is. Like a parent taking delight in seeing themselves in their children, or like an artist proudly signing his great masterpiece, we just witnessed God's delight in marking this boy as His own, proudly setting him apart for Himself.

Sin be damned—death be damned—damnation be damned—our old mirrors can't be trusted. But here at this font, God has handed us one that cannot lie. All of us up here, we all saw a true reflection in these baptismal waters. We witnessed it with our own two eyes—our Lord reaching out and staking His claim on Henry. It's what the Greek New Testament calls the sphragis—it's the sign, the seal, the stamp of ownership. It's the same thing St. John beholds in Revelation when he peeks into heaven and sees the community of saints. There they are, dressed in baptismal garments—washed (baptismal language) and made white in the blood of the Lamb. But John also finds them each with the sphragis—the seal—on their foreheads. In Baptism, Henry has joined their ranks, been incorporated into God's covenant people, not by the circumcision made with hands but the new circumcision—the sealing of the Spirit.

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It is this sphragis that gives him a share in his Savior Jesus Christ who is the image of the invisible God, He is the divine stamped onto human flesh. And like a denarius, Jesus rendered to Caesar what was owed to Caesar—crucifixion being what Caesar did to competing kings. But Jesus also gave to God what is God's—with His own most precious blood, Jesus ransomed Henry out of the clutches of sin, of death, and of the devil, and has given him back to God. Jesus would rather die than go on living without him, so that's just what Jesus did. He's paid dearly for Henry. But now, he is His—only His—nobody else's. Henry is a child of the heavenly Father, a brother in Christ, an heir of the kingdom. He has been stamped with the sphragis—the symbol of his redemption, the cross.

But Henry isn't the only one. Perhaps you noticed we make the sign of the cross around here. It's not because we're Catholic Lite, or Roman wannabes. No, Luther urges us in his Small Catechism to make the sign of the cross daily—every time we get up out of bed and every time we go down to bed—so that day-in-and-day-out you and I never forget who we are by forgetting whose we are. When everything else—like the mirror, mirror on the wall—tells us otherwise, that sign of the cross refreshes our memories. In the waters of our own Baptism, we've gotten a good look at ourselves—our true selves—and seen God's claim on us. We are the Lord's—safely in His care: forgiven, immortal, saved. We are marked as His own—nothing else can touch us.

Y'know, I can just picture it now. The forces of darkness plotting how to entangle Jesus in His own words. Then, one of them nudges the demon next to him—let's call him Lucifer—and says, "Guys, check this out!" He goes up proudly to Jesus and says, "Lord, we know that you're true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you're not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. See all those sinners down there on planet earth—y'know, Henry . . . all those there warming the pews at Ascension . . . the pastor in that pulpit—who do they belong to?" And for a very brief moment it sure looks like Lucifer's got Jesus stumped.

I mean, on the one hand, if Jesus says, Why yours, of course, we'd all be doomed. But on the other hand, if Jesus says anything else then it might sound like He's not quite telling the truth, what with our bad behavior and all, our aging bodies, the fires being stoked for us, how could Jesus not say we belong to sin, death, and hell?

But Jesus, aware of their malice, says, "Why do you put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me their picture." One of the demons pulls down your portrait from off their Wish List wall and hands it to Jesus. And our Lord says to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is that?" And all in unison respond, "Well, yours—there's that cross, and there it also reads, 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'" Then Jesus says, "If you guys had anything you could keep it, but you don't. Therefore render to God the things that are God's." And when they heard it, they marveled. And they left Him and went away.