

Trick Question

Matthew 22:15-22

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And, just as it is for us, politics were all around Jesus. Even his death was political. For, the religious authorities of the day were also steeped in the political culture and climate. They had to either work for Rome or against it. And, even if they hated Rome, those religious groups would often make deals with Rome to advocate for themselves. In today's reading, we have two of those groups. Why not see where Jesus took sides? Then, he could

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Both groups are religious groups and both groups are mired in the politics of the day. So, when they come to Jesus, Jesus sees them as exactly what they are: Neither group cares about the deep faith that Jesus calls them to. They care more about their own agendas and achieving their own religious and political goals.

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If we are imprinted with God's image, and if we are marked with Christ's cross on our foreheads at our baptism, as Abby is today, then we have been marked as God's own since the dawn of creation. Knowing all that, all that we are and all that we have belongs to the one in whose image is bestowed upon us. Jesus says that that should be what helps us make decisions not only with what we do with what God gave us, but in the political realm as well.

So, when you vote this season, dear friends, even as the act of voting may be a political one, you will be doing so as the image of the one who created you.

Trick Question

Matthew 22:15-22

Politics. Just mentioning that word probably brings with it a reaction, right? Just the fact that I even say the word politics out loud may conjure up some discomfort. It does for me. Right now in our culture, I'm hearing over and over again how people are making things political. What do you think that means? What is being political mean? Is it our behavior towards a certain subject? Is it our view of someone else on that subject? What does it mean to be political today? And, what does faith have to do with it? And, I don't know about you, but when first hearing the Gospel for today, politics is the first place that I found my brain went to.

Oh, no! You may be thinking right now, "The pastor is talking politics in her homily! She's getting political. The nightmare has come true!" But, hey, let's just remember that talk of politics wasn't something that I started this morning. The Gospel reading from Matthew, the appointed text for this very Sunday, already went there for us. Taxes! Yes, taxes. The thing that is certain in life along with death, taxes. And, the question being asked Jesus is a trick question and

it's meant to get Jesus to take a particular political side and to reveal whose side he is on. Here is the question: "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the Roman emperor or not?" Said another way, they are essentially asking Jesus, "Are you for Rome or are you against Rome?"

Sadly, as much as we hope and wish as Americans that the life of Jesus didn't include the life of the political realm, it did. We just might not like that. And, despite what we might want the Bible to be, it is actually a very political book. Just read some of the prophetic books like Amos or Isaiah, or the book of Kings. Read the book of Romans or Revelation! These prophets sometimes had hard things to say to their leaders, kings, and country...and they were prophets sent by God to keep their Kings and the people accountable.

And, just as it is for us, politics were all around Jesus. Even his death was political. For, the religious authorities of the day were also steeped in the political culture and climate. They had to either work for Rome or against it. And, even if they hated Rome, those religious groups would often make deals with Rome to advocate for themselves. In today's reading, we have two of those groups. Why not see where Jesus took sides? Then, he could

be pinned, labeled, and revealed to be against the very groups that are asking him this difficult question from Matthew.

Let's look at the two groups who come to try to trick Jesus in the Gospel reading for today. These two groups are the Herodians and the Pharisees both religious groups. Actually, these two groups never got on. They hated each other so that ought to say something if they both want to trap Jesus. The very idea that they get together to get Jesus to make a mistake says something about their desire for Jesus to be dead. So, here they are two religious and very political groups together trying to trap Jesus into saying something.

On one hand the Herodians who follow the kingship of Herod, are religious Jews who are on the side of Rome. They feel that taxes ought to be paid to Rome so that Rome may continue to support King Herod as the rightful King of the Jews. So, it's only natural that the Herodians support Rome.

But, then there are the Pharisees, the religious group who believe that Rome is an oppressive power over them. They do not want to pay taxes to Rome because the emperor of Rome proclaims to be a god, a god that should be worshipped. And, the Pharisees find it idolatrous to

worship anyone but God alone. However, they are also hypocrites since they use Rome when it benefits them to do so politically; that is, if it advances their religious cause.

Both groups are religious groups and both groups are mired in the politics of the day. So, when they come to Jesus, Jesus sees them as exactly what they are: Neither group cares about the deep faith that Jesus calls them to. They care more about their own agendas and achieving their own religious and political goals.

Now, if Jesus should say, "You ought to pay taxes," then the Herodians would consider him a patriot to Rome while the Pharisees would be able to trap him as one who was not faithful to God. However, if Jesus had said, "No, you should not pay taxes to the emperor," then the Herodians would have considered him guilty of treason against the state of Rome. To disagree with the emperor meant that you were not a patriot. So, you see this is a pretty good trap. There seems to be no good answer either way.

So, now we know the background of what Jesus experiences here by these two authorities. And, Jesus does not enter into the political fray. But, he is not neutral either. Instead, he tells it how it is from God's

perspective. He simply tells us what belongs to the emperor and what belongs to God. But, what is that, you might ask? What *does* belong to the emperor and what *does* belong to God?

Notice that Jesus asks for a coin, the coin that would have been used for taxes of that day. On a side note, you might also notice that Jesus has to ask for the coin, as it seems like he does not have any of his own. So, they give him the coin and he holds it up. Jesus asks, "Whose image is this on the coin?" They reply, "The emperor's." "Then, give to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God what is God's."

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