



Proper 24, The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A mother and her young son go out to dinner but the kid is being really rambunctious, so the mom gives him a penny to play with. Before she realizes what's happening, the kid sucks the coin down his windpipe and starts choking. Frantically the mother tries the Heimlich maneuver but it's not working – just as the kid is turning blue, a man at the next table jumps up, grabs the kid in a bear hug, and squeezes him so hard that the penny pops right out of his mouth.

“Thank you!” the mom says, “where did you learn to do that?”

“Oh, I'm an IRS agent, we're trained to squeeze the last penny out of everyone!”

There are lots of jokes about paying taxes, and lots of common complaints about them, because, of course, no one like to pay them. Ancient people were no different. In fact, if anything, taxation in the ancient world, such as during Jesus' time, was far worse. The average person paid a lot in taxes and got very little in return – they certainly didn't get public schools, professional fire fighters, social security, or Medicare.

As we see in today's gospel story, taxes were an especially difficult problem in the lives of Jewish people during the first century. The Pharisees and the Herodians believe they have trapped Jesus with their question because of two particular problems that taxation presented to the nation of Israel. First of all, they were an occupied country, ruled over by a pagan Emperor and a pagan Empire. To pay taxes was to, in essence, support the enemies of God in their oppression of God's people. Secondly, the coins used to pay the taxes bore the image of the Emperor on them – a man who claimed to be a demigod and therefore, to many Jews of that time, the coins represented a form of idolatry. Jesus' inquisitors know that the listening crowds have many reasons to hope that he will encourage them to not use the filthy, idolatrous money of Rome to support Rome's oppression.

And yet, if Jesus does encourage the crowds to not pay taxes, they will have trapped him in an act of rebellion which the Roman authorities will take very seriously. It's quite the conundrum.

On the surface of the story there is actually a very simple lesson which might be useful to us, especially in our present politically charged atmosphere as the election approaches. Sometimes it is better not to debate people with whom you disagree. Jesus and his inquisitors just have very different views of God, of right and wrong, and of how people should live. Jesus chooses to sidestep the possibility of a protracted debate which will not change their minds and will not change Jesus' mind. Jesus endorses a simple life lesson that we all know but sometimes forget: sometimes it's better to not take the bait and just move on with our lives.

Beneath the surface events of the story, though, I think there is a deeper lesson as well. I think it is to be found in the particular Greek word that Jesus uses in this passage: he asks the audience "whose eikon is on the coin?" Eikon is best translated into English as "image" but the NRSV translates it as "head" because the image of the Emperor that was on Roman coins was an image of his head, usually in profile and usually rather crudely carved by our modern artistic standards. You have to be quite an expert in Roman coin imagery to tell the image of one Roman emperor from another when examining these ancient coins.

Of course, we also use the word "eikon" in English as well. Though it mean "image" in general in the Greek, we specifically use that word to refer to images of Christ, the Blessed Virgin, and the Saints which are written in a specific style to adorn our churches, enable our worship, and facilitate our prayers. We have, for example, an icon of St. Cyprian next to the doorway right here in this chapel.

In the context of Roman coinage and Christian art, then, we realize that imagery – or "iconography", as we call it – is about much more than just artistic depiction. The Emperor placed his icon on the coins as a means of asserting his claims to divinity, reminding people of his power, and – as we might say in our modern terminology – finding a way to get inside people's heads. It was hard to forget that Rome was crushing you under their boots when you had to look at an icon of the Emperor every time you got paid, bought something, or tried to give a loved one a gift.

When Jesus says, "give the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor," I think he's partly saying "quit letting this corrupt, evil, narcissistic tyrant get in your heads." If you read the gospels all the way through you realize that Jesus was a big proponent of trusting God to take care of us and not trusting money, political power, or

empires to save us. In essence he's saying "let the Emperor have his coins, in the grand scheme of God's loving plan to redeem and transform the world those coins are just useless bits of metal."

And Jesus is also pointing us towards the converse of that: if we're to let the corrupt tyrants of this world have their meaningless narcissistic games then we are also to remember in whose image we have been created. We are all of us created in the image of God. Those bits of metal are icons of the Emperor and they have no life and no real permanence. But we human beings are icons of God and we are filled with God's life and we are eternal because, in Christ, God shares eternity with us.

Long after all the coins of this world have rusted away to nothing, and all the currency of this world has turned to dust, and the names of the Emperors are no longer remembered, we will live on. And the question we should be asking ourselves is not, "should we pay taxes?" The question we should be asking ourselves is "what am I doing about the things that really matter, the eternal things of the soul?"

What am I doing about loving the people in my family? What am I doing about supporting the life of my church? What am I doing about caring for people in the community around me? What am I doing about opening my life to God's heart to love me and make me more like Jesus?

These are the things that matter. These are the things that last. These are the relationships for which God created us.

Amen.