

Proper 24 A 2011

Isaiah 45:1-7

Psalm 96:1-9

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

In churches all over the world today
Preachers are standing in pulpits,
wrestling with the ancient and daunting question:
Shall I tell them the truth?

What do you think?

The truth is,
Today's gospel story is not about money.

It's almost surprising,
Because so many gospel stories are, in fact,
About money.

Jesus talks about money, as you know,
More than he talks about any other single thing.
Jesus talks more about money
Than he does about war, or peace –
Or sex, or marriage, or food.

Jesus tells us that what we do with money really matters –
It reveals our loyalties and values
And shows where we put our trust.
It is a way to use our human energy for good,
Or for harm,
A way to act out of fear,
Or hope.
Money is part of the gospel,
And it cannot be taken out.

But this story,
In which Jesus holds a coin in his hand,
Is not about money.

That may seem like good news –
Until you begin to wonder if this story is, instead,
About politics.

What could be worse than realizing

Jesus cares what we do with our money?

Figuring out that God is,
As one of my teachers said with a smile
When she was asked a particularly vexing question,
Nothing if not political.
God is nothing if not political.

And maybe that's true of this story.

The question of the Pharisees –
Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor –
is a political trap.

Ever since the Romans had arrived in Palestine,
And occupied, like countless empires before them,
The promised land of the Jews,
Ever since the Romans had come
The Jews had chafed at the requirement
That they pay taxes to their Roman overlords,
Using Roman coins.

Always there was talk of rebellion,
And always it involved refusing to pay taxes.

So the question of the Pharisees is bigger than it looks.
Is it time to start the revolution?
That's the real question.

But the Pharisees aren't sincere;
They're not among the many who are waiting to start a revolution.
They're only looking for a reason
To turn Jesus in.

But Jesus is wise to them.

Show me the coin,
He says to the earnest, wily, anxious religious types
Who want to trick him.

And they put a coin in his hand.

Think for moment, not about the coin,
But about the hand.

We don't really know what that hand looks like.

But we know what that hand does.

This hand, the hand of Jesus,
is the hand that reaches out to bless little children.
This is the hand that reaches out to heal.
This is the hand that takes a couple of loaves of bread,
And breaks them,
And shares them among hundreds of people.

In that hand lies the coin.

We may not know what the hand looks like,
But we can still see the coin today,
Or one just like it.
You can buy one,
Touch it, feel it.

On the coin there's a man,
With rays of glory streaming from his head.
The inscription says,
Son of the god,
Or born from the gods,
Or the divine one,
Or something similar.

The coin means to say,
There is one person more powerful
Than anyone else,
And don't you forget it.

The coin means to say,
Caesar, the emperor,
Is god.

Caesar is god.
He is proclaimed from sea to shining sea.
His cult is carefully maintained.
His statues are magnificent.
His coins show him with a halo.
This is the coin they put in Jesus' hand.

Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth,
Come to Jerusalem to teach and heal,
Holds the coin in his hand,
And weighs it
Along with the tricky question

That hangs in the air.

It's trickier even than we know.
There may have been many
In Roman Palestine
Who chafed at the emperor's rule,
but the truth is,
Jesus and his fellow Jews
Enjoyed a privilege almost unique
In the Roman world.

They did not have to say the emperor was God.
They did not even have to say
The emperor is a god.
They had to pay the tax,
Using the coin that showed
The emperor as a god,
But they did not have to make sacrifices to idols,
Or participate in pagan festivals,
Or bow down before statues,
Or see the standards of Rome
Displayed in the temple.

Everyone standing there knows this,
And we should not forget it.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?

Jesus weighs the coin in his hand.
There are a lot of wrong answers,
Imprudent answers,
Dangerous answers.

A simple yes means complacency,
Disloyalty, cowardice.
It might even imply that Caesar is a god.

A no means,
Start the revolution now –
another futile war,
With certain defeat in the end,
Followed by the loss of that unique privilege,
The freedom to affirm the holiness
of the only God, living and true.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?

There have been as many interpretations
Of what comes next
As there have been centuries since Jesus said these words,
Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's.
Give the emperor the things that are the emperor's.
Give God what belongs to God.

On the one hand,
We've been told it means,
Respect your government.
Separate church and state.
Let the politicians handle politics,
And let Wall Street handle the money,
And let Christians think about morality.

On the other hand,
Tax resisters and pacifists
Have found in this gospel
a compelling warrant for their actions of conscience.

What would Jesus have us do?

I wonder if, in the end,
This story is not about politics
Any more than it is about money.

It's about the energy that drives them both.
This is a story about power.

Whose is the power and the glory?
Who gets to be God in this story?
Caesar, or Jesus?

Wisdom is in Jesus' speech,
And all are amazed.
He holds the coin lightly,
And dismisses it.
He puts it in its place.

Give Caesar what is Caesar's.
Give God what is God's.

Can we discover for ourselves
The complete freedom of Jesus,
Who can hold the coin lightly,

And see through the trick question,
To a truth that is always within reach?

The truth is,
Maybe this is not even a story about power,
But about right relationship with God.

Look again at the question of the Pharisees,
That question intended to trap Jesus
Into either quiescence or rebellion.

Is it lawful?

Whenever the Pharisees ask a question about the law,
Underneath their trick questions
Lies the precious gift
That God gives to the children of Israel,
The gift that keeps them in life-giving relationship
With the God who sets them free and brings them home.

Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?
Is it lawful to eat the bread of the presence?
Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?

And, as always,
When he responds,
Jesus' answer takes the conversation into another realm altogether.

Since everything is God's,
Whether Caesar knows it or not,
What is the problem?

Since everything is God's,
How will we use everything for God?
How will we live so that every coin,
Whoever it shows,
Wherever we spend it,
Every coin is a sign and symbol
Of our life in God?

We move through God's good world,
Getting and spending,
Struggling with questions that have more than one right answer
And maybe no best answer.

Is it lawful to pay taxes?

Should it be?
Is it lawful to camp out in the park across from the capitol,
Occupying Denver?
Should it be?

These are important questions,
But not ultimate questions.

Beyond these dilemmas
Are the real questions,
Who is God?
How do we live into God's promise?

When will we stop looking at that coin
With the emperor's face on it,
And notice the hand that holds the coin?

The hand that reaches out
With infinite compassion,
To take and bless and offer
All the goodness of the true,
The only, the most holy God.

It all belongs to God.
We receive, and give back,
And pay, and receive again,
In a circle of giving and gratitude
Beyond anything the Pharisees or the emperor can imagine.

The emperor's face may be on the coin,
But the hand that holds the coin
Is the hand that holds the world.