

Proper 24 A 2020

Isaiah 45:1-7

Psalm 96:1-9

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

In these chaotic times,
With smoke from wildfires billowing over our heads
And a momentous election looming ever closer
And virus numbers climbing day by day,
Why not start with a parlor game?

If we were gathered in person,
I would ask you to raise your hands.
I could ask the few people gathered here,
But that seems unfair.
Instead, I invite you
To consider this to be a real question,
Because it is.
Come to think of it, if you are able and feel so inclined,
Put your answer in the chat on the livestream.

Which of these three
Would you least like
To hear Jesus talk about today?
Sex?
Or money?
Or politics?

For those of you who said sex,
I bring you good news.
Not only today,
But most days,
It is not Jesus' primary concern.
His radical agenda
Has much more to do with money and politics.

If you said money,
Then on many days,
You would need to gird your loins,
And listen,
Because,
As doubtless you have heard before,
Jesus talks more about money
Than he does about any other single thing.

Because money is a symbol of our life energy
And our ability to control each other,
Jesus cares about how we value it and use it.

We used to understand, at some level,
That money is a symbol,
Because it had symbols on it.
But when was the last time,
In these strange times,
That you held an actual piece of money?
A coin, a bill?

All of them had pictures on them:
People – real men or mythic women –
Buildings, worlds and words and maxims.
The symbols,
When we saw them,
Told us what we valued.
Who we were.
Now we transfer numbers back and forth,
And though numbers too tell a story,
Some layer of meaning is lost
When we don't hold a coin in our hands.

Jesus held a coin in his hand,
Weighing, as he held it,
All that it symbolized,
And all that was at stake.

And yet, 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 used to say with a smile,
Nothing if not political.
God is nothing if not political.

This gospel story

Is about politics.

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

The Jews of Jesus' time
chafed at the requirement
That they pay taxes to their Roman overlords,
Using Roman coins.
Always when they talked of rebellion,
Refusing to pay taxes was the beginning of resistance.

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

The Pharisees aren't sincere;
Their question is not in earnest.
They don't care about starting 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 wily, hypocritical, scheming leaders
Who want to trick him.

And they put a coin in his hand.

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

The hand of Jesus
is the hand that reaches out to bless little children.
The hand that reaches out to heal.
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 a denarius online if you want one;
Touch it, feel it.

On the coin there's a man,
With rays of glory streaming from his head.
The inscription says,
the divine one.

That's the symbol of this coin.
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.
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.

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,
Acquiescence.
Disloyalty, cowardice.
It might even imply
That if you use the coin,
You endorse the symbol,
And admit that Caesar is a god.

A no means,
Start the revolution now –
a futile war,

With certain defeat in the end.

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
And the promise of heaven.

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,
As we live in this moment of tricky questions
And insincere claims of sincerity?
How would he have us navigate this world?
What can the story tell us?

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?

Love is Jesus' power.
Wisdom is Jesus' power.
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?
Only God is God,
And every thing is God's,
Even the coin that tries to say something else.

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

Taxes are real,
And politics are real,
And God is beyond real –
God is truth.

And every question,
In the end,
If we can see it,
Comes back to that truth.

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 of God.
The law creates and maintains life-giving relationship
With the God who sets us free and brings us home.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?

Jesus' answer takes the conversation into the realm of God.

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?

Can we move in freedom through God's good world,
Holding in our hands the truth
That only God is God?

Can that truth
Guide us, as it guided Jesus,
To a clear discernment?
In a world where there are no unmixed motives,
No choices without consequences,
And many second guesses,
Can we hold on to that one truth,
That only God is God?

Is it lawful to pay taxes?
Should it be?
Is my vote connected to my faith,
And should it be?
Can we find God
In the mess of our civic life,
And should we try?
Does God care about the choices we make
In the public realm,
And do we care if God cares?

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

The days to come will be full of doubt,
And hard choices,
And no certainty.
But the good news for today is this:

We can stop looking at that coin
With all its symbols,
And reach for 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.

Everything belongs to God.
All our actions,
All our choices,
All our hopes and fears
And anger and compassion
Happen within the palm of God's hand.

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