

sermon-10/19/08 Newport Pres. Church  
“No Easy Answer”  
Matt. 22:15-22  
By Jim Patten

Fred Craddock tells the story of a classmate of his, Glenn Adsit who ministered mostly in China. “He was under house arrest in China when the soldiers came one day and said, ‘You can return to America.’ They were celebrating, and the soldiers said, ‘You can take two hundred pounds with you.’ Well, they’d been there for years. Two hundred pounds. They got the scales and started the family arguments: two children, wife, husband. Must have this vase. Well, this is a new typewriter. What about my books? What about this? And they weighed everything and took it off and weighed this and took it off and weighs this and, finally, right on the dot, two hundred pounds. The soldier asked, ‘Ready to go?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Did you weigh everything?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘You weighed the kids?’ No, we didn’t ‘Weigh the kids.’ And in a moment, typewriter and vase and all became trash. Trash. It happens.”

It is a matter of priorities. Basically the spiritual life is at heart all about priorities. What takes precedence? What do we value above all else? How does that affect how we treat lesser things, lesser commitments?

We get at this issue of priorities when Matthew tells the story of Jesus and taxes. Some have used this text as an argument for the separation of church and state. The Empire has a claim on one part of our life. God has a claim on the other and never the twain shall meet. We just need to figure out which is which. But, that is not what this story is about.

We get a clue that Matthew is about something much more profound than this by the language he uses to tell this story. He writes that Jesus was aware of the **malice** in the hearts of his questioners. He asks them, “Why put me to the test?” Luke, in telling this same story, would rather talk about the **craftiness** of those who questioned Jesus and omits anything about them putting Jesus to the test.

The word “malice” can also be translated “evil.” And the phrase “put me to the test” can be translated “tempt.” These words remind us of Jesus’ prayer where he teaches us to pray that God would deliver us from evil and to lead us not into temptation. Matthew is telling us a bigger issue is going on here than just a clever question used to trap Jesus. The issue of priorities is at the center of our life with God. It is a question of following God or being tempted by evil, by all that works against what God is doing in the world.

Let’s set the stage. The Pharisees and the Herodians join forces to try and trap Jesus. These two groups are very strange bed-fellows. The Pharisees hated the Roman tax. They thought loyal Jews should work against paying it. The Herodians supported Herod, the Roman puppet king and thus were all for paying taxes. They were on opposite sides of the fence on this issue.

But, when it came to opposing Jesus, they found common ground. They ask Jesus a question where he seemingly can't win. If he says to not pay taxes, he would get in trouble with Rome. If he said to pay taxes he would be seen as a disloyal Jew. What to do?

Jesus decides he is not going to be limited by those two options. He says, in essence, it is not a question of either/or. It is more a question of priorities. So he asks whose image is on the coin they would use to pay taxes.

Caesar's image, or head, was on the coin. Thus the coin belonged to Caesar. What he did not say, but is implied, is whose image is on each one of us? We are made in God's image. Every Jew knew that. Thus, we belong to God.

As one scholar notes, the fact we belong to God changes everything. That reality conditions all our other relationships and commitments. It takes precedence over all else. We look at any other commitment out of the context of being made in God's image. We belong to God.

So, what is the right thing to do? Should they pay taxes to Caesar? What should we do when we encounter a conflict where there are no easy answers? Jesus refuses to give a black and white answer. He refuses to make it simple for us.

Jesus won't say that being a good Jew meant they were to opt out of being a citizen that pays taxes. But, at the same time, because they are made in God's image, they were not to act like slaves to the Empire and do everything they were asked to do. If they pay taxes, it is done in the freedom of knowing they belong to something far bigger than the Empire.

Jesus won't settle for an either/or answer to their question. As one commentator says, Jesus is offering the Jews, and us, the grace of living "permanently uneasy" lives when it comes to deciding how to act when our loyalties are in tension with other loyalties. We have to discern in each situation what is the faithful thing to do. We can't demonize either side.

When it comes to obeying the Empire, any empire, including our own beloved country, we can obey as long as obeying does not force us to go against our higher commitment to God. What does that mean in a particular situation? There are no easy answers. We need each other in the church to do the hard work of discerning case by case. And we may not all agree. Should we support this or that war? Should we support universal health care?

At the presbytery peacemaking conference at Mercer Island Presbyterian Church a couple of weeks ago, the speaker put it this way. Being patriotic is a wonderful thing. It only becomes troublesome once we put being patriotic on the same level as our commitment to God. We ought to have a great affection for our country. But, we worship God. When we confuse affection with worship we run the danger of doing evil things. Much evil has been done down through the years under the guise of patriotism.

In this election year this text is crucial. As one scholar says, our “primary loyalties don’t switch when (we) move out of the church and into the voting booth.” Does this tell us how to vote? Absolutely not. But, when Christians vote, they carry the values of their faith into the voting booth and vote for people and issues even if it means voting for things that don’t benefit them individually.

One person put it this way. There are no separate spheres of loyalty. We live in “concentric spheres of identity.” God is the largest sphere encompassing all other spheres. Giving to Caesar what is Caesar’s and giving to God what is God’s is all about recognizing that God’s sphere encompasses all other spheres and should determine how we relate to those smaller spheres.

What does this look like? Let me end with a true story. Rita Nakashima Brock tells the story of an ordinary woman who lived in a small town near Modesto, CA. “She was the kind of person we’d call a good neighbor. She was friendly, liked by her neighbors, and was good to her family. When the U.S. entered the Second World War, she supported our government-until California Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren signed an order requiring all U.S. citizens of Japanese ancestry to be interned in relocation camps. Many of this woman’s neighbors were Japanese Americans. She knew them and loved them as her friends. She went to Sacramento and lobbied the legislators. She wrote to the president to try to stop the camps and the government confiscation of Japanese property. She could not move the powerful and famous. She was a lone nobody. . . So this lone woman. . .bought all the Japanese farms and homes in her town for a dollar each and watched her friends be taken away. When the camps were closed, when the Japanese who survived had no homes left, when their lands were stolen by our government, this woman’s neighbors were lucky. She gave her friends and neighbors back their homes and land so that they might live.”

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s” May we live into the permanently uneasy grace such an answer offers us in our own time and place. Amen