

Matthew 22:15-22

21st Sunday after Pentecost

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

I really love this parable. I love the way that Jesus gets the better of those who use false flattery to trick him, I love how quickly and cleverly he responds, and I love how this teaching touches on our own lives even though none of us are particularly concerned about Roman emperors or their taxes.

What Jesus is getting at here is the insight that as people we are not wholly independent and autonomous beings charting our own courses but that our lives are lived out within a web of relationships. All of us live our lives within these webs, within these systems. The 17th century poet John Donne reiterated this point in his most famous poem writing "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."

And most of the systems we live in have their own rules and patterns even if we are unaware or unmindful of them. Language is one; our view of the world is deeply shaped by the words available to us and we would be at a loss to describe something for which we have no words. Building from language there are unacknowledged rules of grammar that everyone "knows" even if they aren't aware that they know them. A famous one in English concerns adjectives; the rule is that multiple adjectives are always in a particular order: opinion, size, age, shape, color, origin, material, purpose. For example you would never say a "green old big car," but would say instead a "big old green car."

But the systems we live in govern much more than our speech, they also serve to offer us ways of behaving and relating to others. It's well established that all other things being equal, taller and more attractive people receive more respect and opportunities. Similarly, we tend to think of mothers as the more natural parent and fathers as mere

helpers instead of equal co-parents. I can't tell you how often people refer to my being with my children when my wife is away as "baby-sitting" when they would never refer to the opposite situation that way.

Back to Jesus, the point Jesus is trying to make here is that money is a system and it is a system that the Judean people of his day participated in. It just so happened that there was a conflict between their participation in the system and the Law of Moses. In the law, it is forbidden to worship idols or to acknowledge any other god except God. But Roman coins had the picture of the emperor on them, and most people (but not the Judeans) considered the emperors as gods (or at least god-like). So, the real question Jesus is being asked is whether or not, by using money, were faithful Jews violating God's law.

Jesus turns the tables by pointing out that participation in the system of money is a choice. It may not feel like a choice, but it is one nonetheless, even if choosing to stand apart from that system would entail extreme hardship. This encounter pairs well with another, when Jesus invites his followers to take on his yoke and burden. The invitation here expands on this teaching because the way of Christ is also a kind of system. But unlike all the other systems the world has to offer, the yoke of Jesus is easy, and his burden is light.

The ultimate lesson here is about mindfulness and intention. Jesus is asking us to not just passively accept the systems in which we live but to give them careful thought, to weigh the advantages and disadvantages, and to understand the compromises involved. The path to abundant life is not one which can be blindly or easily followed. It takes care and attention. But it is the only path that leads to true contentment and to eternal life.