

Lectionary A October 19, 2014 19th Sunday after Pentecost
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church, Evansville, IN 47714
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Isaiah 45:1-7
Psalm 96:1-9 [10-13]
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

Left Speechless

This is quite a story in our Gospel lesson today. We have two groups, the Pharisees and the Herodians, who don't get along, except they both are threatened by Jesus and so they hold their noses, put aside their many differences for a moment, and come together to pose Jesus a question that they hope will put him between a rock and a hard place: First of all they butter Jesus up. , *"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. 17 Tell us, then, what you think"* Then, here it comes, *"Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"*¹

You ever had anyone do that to you? Act all sweet and then let you have it so you see that their motives are not to be friends with you? Jesus saw this. *"Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"*

You see, if Jesus said yes to paying the taxes the Pharisees and the many in the crowds who hate being bullied by the Roman empire—especially the poor who were really hit by this “flat tax” were going to be upset. Let me explain, this wasn't just another tax. It was the Imperial tax paid as tribute to Rome to support the Roman occupation of Israel. Sounds crazy to us but, the first-century Jews were required to pay their oppressors a denarius a year to support their own oppression.² Everyone paid the same amount no matter how much you had. See why that tax wasn't popular?

However, on the other hand, if he said no to the tax, the Herodians, who supported the Roman control of the Jews, would take that news back to the “powers that be” in no time flat. They all knew what the Romans would do to someone who talked against their precious “tax.” The way they planned it Jesus wasn't going to get out of this one.

Jesus saw through their scheme. This is how Jesus responded as recorded in the Message Bible. *"Why are you playing these games with me? Why are you trying to trap me? Do you have a coin? Let me see it."* They handed him a silver piece.

"This engraving—who does it look like? And whose name is on it?"

They said, "Caesar."

*"Then give Caesar what is his, and give God what is his." The Pharisees were speechless. They went off shaking their heads.*³

¹ NRSV Bible

² : <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/10/pentecost-19a-money-politics-and-religion/>

³ The Message Bible

They left that place speechless. They had just been smacked in the face by some pretty heavy things to think about. And this wasn't the way they had it all planned. What happened here?

First of all, everyone there was a Jew. They all believed in God's law. Jesus, in his own way had just laid open a whole new issue here. . Asking them to identify the image of the emperor stamped into the coin's surface, with an inscription claiming Caesar was a god had to make everyone painfully aware of the scripture against graven images in the Exodus (Exodus 20:4).⁴ By asking that they produce a coin with a graven image on it in the Temple, where there were to be no graven images, Jesus changed the issue. It's not so much about whether or not to pay taxes. The issue now is plain and simple idolatry.

And what's more, when Jesus asked them whose "image" was on the coin, the word he used for "image" is the same one used in Genesis 1:26 when God said, "*Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness*"

By using a coin engraved by human hands in the image of a human being, the Emperor Caesar, Jesus, in a few short words, reminds all present that they were made in God's image. The question was no longer about to whom the coin belonged. Now it was about to whom they belonged.

It is sort of like when my kids were young and they asked me for some money to buy something. If I gave it to them and they made their purchased, I probably would ask them to share it. Well, then I would get comments like, "Its mine. I bought it." Excuse me? Whose money did you use? Just because you handed the money to the cashier, does that mean you own the item purchased?

They left speechless because now they had their own dilemma. If they truly believed in this Jewish law they were claiming to stand for, then everything that belonged to Caesar, belonged to God first. God created everything and what's more. They were created in God's image. They were stamped with God's image on them? How does that make a difference here?

Some have tried to use this scripture as a way of saying there is a dividing line between what we do politically and what we do religiously, but I can't see that. I see Jesus pointing out that all we do politically is under the umbrella of who we are. We are God's children, marked with God's identity in all we do in church and out in the world.

That's something that should leave us speechless, too. Jesus isn't telling us how to vote politically, he isn't telling us what to do with our money. He just wants us to stop and think before we act. He wants us to remember that before we are Democrat, Republican, or Independent, we are Christian.

⁴ Lance Pape, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2201

And about our money—while we may be confident that how we spend our money is our business and no one else's, if we forget in whose image we have been made we may succumb to the temptation to believe that we are no more than the sum total of our possessions and that our bank accounts tell a true story about our worth and value.

Jesus, here today, is telling us that is simply not true. Jesus does this by raising some important questions here, but notice that he doesn't give pat answers. He isn't giving us a prescription on how to spend our money and other resources.

He wants us to stop and think as we go about our daily lives. He wants us to remember that all we have is from God and all God has is ours to use. That makes me speechless!

Jesus invites us to live with this constant reminder that no matter what we may do or say, no matter where we may go, no matter what may happen to us, we are first, foremost, and forever God's own beloved child. That identity will, in turn, shape our behavior, urging and aiding us to be the persons we have been called to be.

I came across an activity a pastor did with her congregation. She had everyone to get out a credit card, or debit card, or if they didn't have any of those things, she asked them get out some kind of dollar bill. With a permanent marker, she told them to mark their card or money with a sign of the cross. Then every time they use that card or money, they would see that sign as a reminder of who they are.

Here is my card marked with a cross. When I see that cross, that symbol of what Jesus did for me, I am in awe. I'm speechless. I can't buy something without thinking about whether or not a purchase lines up with my own sense of values and God-given identity. This doesn't give me a yes or no answer about what I buy, but it makes me think for myself about how my faith affects my decisions about spending.

And you know what? This isn't a bad thing that that slaps me in the face with guilt. No, in fact, it is empowering to be reminded of my identity as a child of God, something no amount of spending or saving could change. It takes my breath away, for a moment and roots me in my faith, inviting me to actively reflect on how my faith shapes my daily life and particularly my economic life. You might want to try this yourself.

How does living under God's identity umbrella effect our lives? As we offer our prayers today, let's lift up our desires, our fears, our needs and mark them with a sign of the cross. Let us pray boldly, knowing our identity as God's own children. Bring those prayers up to the altar when you come to share this Holy Meal. As you come I invite you to dip your hands into the baptismal font and put that sign on your foreheads.

This is where we are marked with a sign of the cross in baptism. This is where we are left speechless in awe of our identity as children of God. Amen.

