

Sun Oct.18, 2026 - 21st Sunday after Pentecost

This sermon was written by Sean Bell who is the Pastor at Resurrection Lutheran Church in Saskatoon SK.

Speakers Note: Sean writes with way too many ellipses (...) but us unwilling to change.

Gospel: Matthew 22:15-22

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 Caesar 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, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Our Gospel reading today begins with malice... And ends in amazement...

There is an imbalance of power and perspective. Those people who think they have power and authority make a move on Jesus thinking their power and authority is going to overwhelm and trick him.

It reminds me of an old joke:

God was once approached by a powerful man who said, "Listen God, we've decided we don't need you anymore. These days we can clone people, transplant organs and do all sorts of things that used to be considered miraculous."

God replied, "Don't need me? How about we put your theory to the test. Why don't we have a competition to see who can make a human being out of the elements of creation.

The powerful man agrees, so God takes up dust and dirt and starts to create a human.

The powerful man bends down to scoop up a handful of dirt.

"Whoa!" says God, shaking his head in disapproval. "Not so fast. You get your own dirt."

"Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

On one level... Any person of faith realizes that everything belongs to God... We come into the world with nothing and we leave with nothing...

As the 90's Christian band "Hokus Pic Maneuver" sung "You don't see a U-Haul being pulled behind a hearse."

What does the emperor have? Ultimately?... Nothing...

This could be a good time for a stewardship sermon...

To challenge ourselves to examine how we are using what God has given to us...

And whether our values are in line with God's Kingdom values...

Are we welcoming the stranger... Supporting the poor?

Do we make sure those who have nothing are cared for?

What about refugees?

Are our coins going out and bearing the image of God...

Or are they declaring something different...

Is our money and action saying something other than what God has called most important?

...

Pause

...

But speaking of money is only the beginning...
Something much deeper is going on...

Our Gospel reading is pulling us into a curious moment in the life of Jesus...

The context of the Gospel story ... Matthew 22... It is the last week of Jesus pre-resurrection life...

Matthew 21 tells the story of Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. Hosanna in the highest... Palm branches...

And Jerusalem is full! It's Passover so people from everywhere have gathered... It's like the Exhibition, Folk Fest, Craven, Grey Cup and Ag Expo all rolled into one. *(Insert other regional large festival if you aren't in Saskatchewan).*

Problematically... Jesus first action upon coming to town is controversy...
He forms that whip of chords and drives the money changers out of the temple...
God's house, God's economy is not about rich getting better offerings...
Why do you seek to control God with money and burnt offerings... God is for all! Throw open the doors!!! You can't control God!!!

In the lectionary readings these last few weeks we have heard Jesus telling stories of how insiders become outsiders...

How the powers that be ... might not be the ones who have honoured places in the Kingdom of God...
Jesus is offering a whole new way to imagine being human... To imagine who God creates us to be...

The image of God is on us all...

The image of God comes to us in grace and forgiveness as we live lives in constant need of realignment and justification...

Jesus flips the trap of the powerful and is reminding everyone of who they are.
In a sense... Jesus is finishing the joke we started the sermon with... get your own dirt.

Picture it... Pharisees... And Herodians... Have come to him... With malice... Looking to trick him into saying something that they can arrest him for...
Some piece of evidence that shows he is a heretic or a traitor to Rome...

Pharisees are religious elites... They have memorized the rules and strive to apply them as strictly as possible.

Herodians are the supporters of Herod.. Herodians support the puppet government of Herod...

Can you picture it? Those important people of power trying to take care of this table flipping Jesus problem?

And Rome hovers above it all... Ready to impose the Pax Romana... The Peace of Rome... That is... Military peace... Peace through force... Peace through compliance...

And here is the trick question: asking Jesus whether it was lawful to pay the Roman imperial tax that funds the Roman occupation.

If Jesus says yes...

The crowd that now cheers for him will be disappointed...

The people that are counting on him to drive out the Romans...

The people looking for a revolution with a mighty warrior messiah made in the image of all earthly power...

they will turn on him.

He will lose all credibility... He will become a forgotten prophet.

The Herodians and Pharisees will win... end of story.

But if he says no... Don't pay Rome...

Then he has declared himself publicly against Rome...

And the Herodians will strike...

They will have all they need to arrest him...

Riots will break out... people will be hurt and die.

AND in the end... Rome will impose peace through military might...
The Herodians and Pharisees win again.

So... What to do??? How to respond???

The trap is set.

The Trap is in the assumptions that are hidden in the question.

You see this same rhetorical trap all the time when an interviewer puts assumptions into the question...

The trap is designed to put Jesus on the defensive... to identify the main issue as taxes... and that's not Jesus primary concern and it's a over simplified false binary.

Jesus refuses the question's assumptions and redirects to something much deeper and more profound...

--- Show me a coin...

Who is on the coin? The picture of the Emperor...

But so much more than a picture...

There is an inscription that says "The Divine Caesar Augustus"...

Caesar is making claims about who he is and what authority he possesses.

Rather than get caught in the trap...

Jesus is saying the quiet part outloud...

Whose image is on the coin?

It's just some guy who is claiming to be God.

Well... give him what is his... and give God what is Gods.

And suddenly there is another question underneath the trick question that Jesus was asked... if the coin belongs to Ceasar because it bears Caesar's image... then what belongs to God?

What bears God's image?

We do... you do... every human being bears the image of God...
And all were amazed.

I think they were Amazed because they already had all that the Emperor was going to give them... Positions of authority and some comfort and earthly wealth.

This is all that the Emperor has... Temporary, conditional privilege for some...
This is what powerful people always have...
This is what they have always offer us.

We still live in a world where there is great competition to tell us who we are.
Advertisements tell us what we need to be happy.
Politicians tell us what kind of people we should be.
Our jobs can tell us that our value comes from what we accomplish.
Our culture can tell us that our worth comes from what we own, how we look, how successful we are, or which group we belong to.

There is great competition to tell you who you are... And control how you act.

The so called almighty emperor and his mountain of coins?
Where do you look for security?
Where do you look for your worth?
Where do you look to find out who you are?
And what happens when these things fail us.

When the military fails to defend the helpless and turns to genocide?
When country neighbours turn to global expansion and war crimes?

Do you accept that things are the way they are? Make up some justification about what is lawful to do?

Or... Do you trust God's image on everything in all creation?

Do you trust that the image of God is on you... That you are made in the image of God?

Our Gospel ends with "When they heard this they were amazed... And they left him... And went away..."

And the whole story ends with Jesus dying and rising... All expectations turned upside down... As it wasn't the money and soldiers and killing and death and pain that win...

It is not the emperor who gets the final word.
It is not the empire that gets the final word.
They play in the dust... God's dust.
And God gets the final word.

Today we are sitting in church:
and the church proclaims Christ crucified.
The church proclaims that you are made in the image of God:

Here at church God doesn't ask us to prove who we are. God tells us who we are.

This is amazing...

God tells us in Baptism that we belong to God. That we are children of God. That is the most important identity we have and the only one that will outlive us.

Amazing...

In communion, God tells us what we are members of the Body of Christ. Part of the family of faith that gathers here and with Christians all over the world. We are invited to dine at God's meal of forgiveness and new covenant.

Amazing...

God tell us who our Community is... God gives us brothers and sisters, siblings in faith, who are with us when we struggle, when we try to figure out how to live in a world that will always be trying to tell us who we are... and who we own allegiance too.

Amazing...

In God's church, the question is answered... It all belongs to God.

All are welcome to this forgiveness and new life... new way of seeing the dirt... new way of seeing each other... new way of seeing all creation.

In church we hear what God has done for us, we hear how Jesus is working in our lives, and we are promised that when we fail, when we are broken and suffering, and when we die, that God is there putting us back together, giving us new life.

Give to the Emperor what is the Emperors...

But remember what belongs to God. All the dirt and dust and Oceans and Mountains and cosmos...

You belong to God... you bear God's image.

And nothing in call creation... not Caesar, not empire, not wealth, not failure, not suffering, not even death... can take that away.

In Christ, God has claimed us, forgiven us, and give us new life.

And God will be with us always, to the end of the age.

Amen.