

Today is my 39th Sunday worshipping with you all as your pastor since I was appointed here in July. But who's counting, right? It would have been more fun to say the 40th Sunday, but the 39th still feels impressive and amazing.

I really think it's going well. It's a tricky thing in ANY KIND of congregation - the matching of an already existing church with a new pastor. It's totally different when a new pastor gathers a NEW congregation. But matching pre-existing churches and pastors can be a little tricky.

All of the new leaders and I have learned a lot together these past months. I've really enjoyed working through conundrums with everyone - especially as we came back from Covid as soon as I arrived.

I thought I'd mention one of our conundrums - with April 15 looming as tax day - and this passage before us about paying taxes to Caesar - so we can get into stride for this message today.

The conundrum is - just like any property, as a church, we pay property taxes. Thankfully, because we're a religious institution, we receive a partial exemption - its a helpful amount I might add. HOWEVER - there are rules we have to follow in order to receive the exemption. One of the rules is that we can't charge fees to use any part of our facility for non-religious activities purely to make a profit. So as we as leaders think about and decide how to meet our budget and pay our mortgage, etc., we must continually decide - whose image is stamped on us? What I mean is - as we decide how to use our facility - do we choose to act as children of God, making morally right decisions and caring for one another at every step? In this case, do we uphold the law and treat one another with respect as we make leadership decisions? Or do we act as people with the stamp of the world

upon us instead, searching for loopholes to make money, no matter what the cost to relationships and integrity? This was the teaching Jesus tried to get across in our passage today. As I dive into it a bit more, I'll be using parts of a message given by Dr. Michael Lodahl, a Graduate school professor of theology at Point Loma Nazarene University - that he preached on this passage a few years ago and I'm reusing some of his message, because the points he made then are still relevant and explain this passage.

Our sermon series for Lent has been focusing on the last week of Jesus' life. We already looked at his entry into Jerusalem upon a donkey and the incident of turning tables over and running off the money changers in the Temple.

By this time, in that last week of his life, pressure is mounting and controversies are swirling about who Jesus really is and who would follow him. The multitudes loved Jesus, but the higher ups, those in authority, especially in the Jewish community, saw him as a threat to their power. And they were trying to decide how to deal with him - a troublemaker and social influencer.

Specifically, there were two groups of people - enemies of a sort - who had begun to work together early in Jesus' ministry just to bring him down. They're mentioned right at the beginning of our passage today - the Pharisees and the Herodians.

Who are the Pharisees and the Herodians?

In a way, they weren't all that different from our system of Democrats and Republicans. Just like we've heard on the news constantly this past week with the confirmation hearings for the Supreme court, the Pharisees and the Herodians also have been on the "opposite sides of the isle".

The name - Herodians - kind of gives away who they were. There were Jews who supported Herod, the “King of the Jews” - a puppet ruler installed and supported by the Roman government. And Herod had the Roman military to back him up, so the Herodians really benefited from this arrangement - politically and economically. The main point about the Herodians is that they would have been fully in support of paying taxes to keep the Roman government in power. One of the ways the Romans “kept the peace” was by crucifying their enemies as a public sign of their power. In those days, Roman crucifixes covered the landscape. Most places that people walked - wherever they looked - they were met with bloody crucifixions meant to strike fear in their hearts - crucifixions usually took place along main thoroughfares. In fact, carpenters probably got a lot of work in those days making crucifixes.

On the opposite side of the coin - the Pharisees did not like, appreciate or support Rome’s power in the holy land. However, they didn’t advise their followers to actively resist them. They saw Rome’s presence and power over them as a sign of God’s punishment on the people of Israel, because of their unfaithfulness by not keeping the covenant laws. The Pharisees just hoped to survive the difficult times. They used the violence around them to convince their followers to be more obedient to the laws of the Torah. We could probably call the Pharisees passive-aggressive about the tax laws. They despised the Roman coins with the image of Caesar on them - the emperor who was god - but they would never suggest not paying taxes.

If you heard my message last week, you might remember that Jesus had JUST forcefully moved his way through the outside court of the Temple, turning over tables and

benches, running off the money changers and releasing animals that were for sale for temple sacrifices. Jesus stepped into THEIR turf then - the Pharisees and Herodians - and tore down their system.

Not only that, but a few days before that temple incident, Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, a flagrant a sign of his defeat over them - a sign that he was already in power. Jesus didn’t need a stallion to ride into the city upon, he could ride a donkey. His sign of assurance to the masses.

Those two moments - riding into town on a donkey and then turning over tables and running out the money changers - are what scholars call “prophetic deeds”. Jesus was teaching by doing. It was symbolic, but it made the point to everyone - including the Pharisees and Herodians - and they did NOT appreciate it.

So - the Herodians and Pharisees began conniving together - they joined sides to move against a new enemy - Jesus. And they conspired by trying to trick him in a public contest of words.

They asked him, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Basically asking, “Should we pay taxes or not?” If Jesus said yes, those Jews who were fervently religious would be shocked and they’d turn against him immediately. They already had ammunition against Jesus to prove that he favored the Romans. Didn’t he make a tax collector one of his own followers - Matthew - the author of this gospel we’re reading from? And didn’t he eat meals with groups of tax collectors? If he said yes, It would prove Jesus was sympathetic to Rome.

On the other hand, if he said, “No”, then the Herodians would probably report him to the Roman authorities and sight him for

insurrection. This Jesus was mounting a rebellion.

None of that is lost on Jesus. He knows their evil intent and so asks this rhetorical question - "Why are you putting me to the test?" It's rhetorical, because he already knows the answer. And then the next moment is gold, solid gold.

Jesus asks to look at a denarius - one of the coins of the time. This tells me he probably didn't carry money much, though he knew what was on the coin. As I said before, it was stamped with the image of Caesar, the emperor, and had the Latin inscription - "son of the divine Augustus." You see, the Roman Senate had declared that Caesar's father, Augustus, was divine - was god - so this statement that Caesar's the son of Augustus - was also a statement of his divinity - he also was god.

Then Jesus asks the crowd - "Whose head is on the coin and whose inscription?"

"The emperor's" they reply.

Well - says, Jesus - if the emperor's name and picture are on the coin - give it back to him, it's his. Maybe Jesus even said it with a gleam in his eye and a chuckle - how crazy was it for an emperor to lose something with his precious face on it to begin with - ha ha. But then Jesus delivers the punch line.

"And give to God what belongs to God." If Caesar has pieces of silver with his image stamped on them, by all means let him have his pieces of silver. But how do we know what belongs to God?

Interesting. Has God stamped the truly divine image on anything? Well, not on rocks or jewels or pieces of silver, but everyone there listening to Jesus that day knew that according to the very first chapter in the Bible, God had stamped God's own image on every single human being, for ALL humanity (in Hebrew-

the word ADAM - encompasses all human beings) all are stamped with the divine image. If Caesar's image is impressed upon a coin, it must be his coin. But if God's image is impressed upon us, then we must be God's. And we are.

Jesus never really solves the tangly issue of the church and state and paying taxes or not. He really doesn't. Maybe we wish that he would. What he DOES say is- that in all that we are, in all that we do, in all that we think, in all that we have - each and every human belongs to God -you and me. We belong to God.

The rest of the New Testament repeatedly says that the perfect expression of the divine image is Jesus himself - and one of the very important reasons we become members of a church like Corona UMC is so that this divine image, perfectly contoured in the life of Jesus, can ever more deeply etch itself upon you, upon me, upon us all. That's what we're doing here. We've been purchased. The price has already been paid. We are the property of Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer for all time - if we agree to receive it.