

Sermon Notes October 22, 2023
Peace Lutheran Church
The Holy Gospel of Matthew 22: 15-22
“There's No Trapping the Son”

Money and Politics: two risky topics for those who preach, teach, or even converse about in the church -- and today's texts address both. Whenever I approach either of these two subjects, folks in the pews will listen attentively, either maybe trying to trap the pastor as they did Jesus, or pondering these themes in new ways.

Many of us no longer carry coins in our pockets. Yet we can recite whose heads-or-faces (“tails”) are engraved or stamped onto our coins or dollar bills. Or how many of them say “In God We Trust.” I could then embark upon naming controversial topics, such as whether we are a Christian nation, whether churches should display the American flag (they should!), or whether taking a knee during the national anthem disrespects our country.

In Jesus' time, coins had the engraved image of Caesar, emperor of the vast Roman Empire, on them. Caesar was deemed a god, and was to be worshiped and have homage paid to him. Yet the law of the Israelites, beginning with the Ten Commandments and continuing into the early books of the Old Testament - Mosaic Law - said graven images were idolatrous. Even holding a coin with the image of Caesar on it was blasphemous. How ironic that the Pharisees were the ones to have had these contentious Caesar coins lining their pockets, so to speak.

So moving on to the Pharisees' encounters with Jesus. The religious authorities are in Jesus' face, plotting how to trap him. After all, Jesus is challenging their authority, both political and religious, and it will lead to his arrest and eventual death.

The trick question: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? It seems taxes are always unpopular, or at least controversial, and the question stirs up more questions for our times: how do we feel about government and its tax proposals? What do we believe are the best ways to work for the common good and support those most vulnerable in society? What would Jesus say to our trick questions, or would he give an enigmatic answer like he does in the gospel? How might we use Jesus' approach, rather than giving clear-cut answers as if we have everything worked out in our minds?

At one point Martin Luther suggested that God works through spiritual means in the church and through temporal means in society to maintain peace and civility in that society. Yet “there are two sides to a coin,” literally and figuratively. Things are more complicated than Luther's assertion. Many Americans find it impossible to imagine any president not to be a Christian, or at least religious. Yet in our first reading, God uses Cyrus – a pagan Persian ruler-to bring about divine purposes. Cyrus, who doesn't even

seem to know the Lord, is declared God's appointed (as he freed the Jewish people from captivity in the East and allowed them to return to their homeland of Israel).

Both spiritual and secular leaders can serve the common good. Yet, there can also be corruption in religion and in government. Luther certainly got that right. Everyone can be motivated by both godly and selfish purposes.

We should be reminded that the word for "head" in the text means "image" and is related to our word icon. Some church people may think of icons of Jesus, Mary, and the saints when they hear the word "icon." Others will think of the small pictures of symbols on their computer screens.

We could play with these words - head, image, and icon - in creative ways, and eventually bring in a gospel turn. We might not have coins in our pockets very often anymore, but we are God's treasure. Coined in the image of God, we give to the Father the things that are His - our very lives. In the Eucharist we are strengthened to join the holy work of caring for one another and our vulnerable earth. Amid all the trick questions of life, and because of mercy alone, in Christ alone ...we trust.

