

Stamped with the Image

October 23, 2011

Matthew 22:15-22

“We’d better start savin’ up for the things that money can’t buy.”

(Bruce Springsteen)

The question of taxes is hot right now. The most basic plank in the platform of our nation’s two main political parties is all about taxes. One party says taxes are a morally neutral way for citizens to participate in the work of their government. The other party says taxes are bad, should never be increased, and when possible, should be reduced or eliminated. One party says government has a legitimate role in providing for the common good, and the other party says government is at best a necessary evil. It is one thing to pay taxes to something you respect, but it quite another thing to pay taxes to something you don’t.

My father was an Iowa Republican farmer. He died just before the Reagan revolution, when the Republican party hitched its wagon to the rail labeled, “government is the problem.” I have always wondered whether my dad would have followed his party to this new place, or whether he would have stuck to his principles. He was born, after all, when Republican Theodore Roosevelt was

president. (Not FDR, but TR) I think my dad grew up with a respect for the role of government that many of today's Republicans would not recognize or appreciate. He would say things like, "So and so always complains about paying taxes. But who's going to fix our roads and bridges and run our schools and jails if we don't have government? And how is government going to run if we don't pay our taxes? It's our fair share." Well, that was then, 35 years ago, and this is now. As I say, I have always wondered if my father would have stuck to his guns or changed his tune.

For those who think that politics and religion ought not be mixed or aired in public, today's gospel text is a problem. The story in Matthew is made even more volatile by adding a third element to the already combustible mix. Money. Taxes. Money to God or money to government? If some of you knew that this was today's scripture, you might have stayed home. But before you get up and leave or tune me out, consider this...

At Christmas we always read Luke's beloved story that begins this way, as most of you know by heart: *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.* Some versions say *all the world should be registered,* and others say *all the world should be taxed.* (Clearly Augustus was not a Reagan Republican, eh?) Caesar decreed that all the

world ruled by his great Roman empire needed to register to pay the tax called the census. People did not like taxes in those days, either. The Jews of Roman occupied Palestine had good reason to hate the empire, the Roman government, and to hate the collaborators like King Herod and the tax collectors like Matthew. As much as some of us love to hate our governments and their taxes, first century Jews in Palestine had even more reason to do so.

There were three kinds of Roman taxes in those days, and the one called the census was the most unpopular. Everyone in the province had to pay the census, whether they had income, property, produce or not. This was the ultimate flat tax. (Perhaps Herman Cain should have re-read Luke before proposing his famous 9-9-9 tax plan?) The Roman census was required of every individual, and the amount required for this tax was a denarius, the equivalent of a day's pay for a common laborer. A pittance for millionaires, an impossibility for a peasant. The denarius was a Roman coin with the image of Caesar on its face.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" the denarius for the census was what they were talking about. There is no question imaginable that would be more explosive than this, mixing a tax (hated but necessary) for a government (hated but all-powerful and not going anywhere),

required by a civil law (hated like the government that imposed it)...mixing all that with the question of what God's law says. You did not have to be a scholar of Roman or Jewish law to know that this was a train wreck waiting to happen!

Notice that when Jesus was asked about this flat tax, neither he nor his disciples happened to have a denarius on them. Judas Iscariot the treasurer may have had a few pennies in the common purse, but it was unlikely that there were any denarii, shekels or drachmas to be found among the followers of Jesus. They were poor. The thirty pieces of silver that Judas later used to betray Jesus is an astonishing amount of money for this group, the equivalent of a month's worth of labor.

The other reason that neither Jesus nor his disciples had the right coin for the tax on them is that Jews regarded the denarius as a pagan idol. It violated the commandment against graven images. The human face of the so-called divine Caesar on the Roman coin was idolatry to Jews. Tax collectors and money changers in the Temple were vile creatures to the Jews because they handled this dirty money: you needed to change your drachmas or shekels into a denarius to pay the tax to Rome, and you needed to use only drachmas or shekels to pay the Temple tax.

Beyond all that, the denarius was dirty money because this graven image of Caesar on the face of the coin was a double idolatry, even blasphemy. Tiberius, like his father Augustus, claimed that he was a god. He wasn't just the emperor. He was divine. In each major Judean town, the Romans had placed statues to Caesar that not only proclaimed his as in power, controlling everything and everyone around, but that this Caesar ought to be revered, worshiped as supreme. You would come to the statue, burn a pinch of incense in prayer, and pledge allegiance to Caesar as Lord. The inscription on the denarius coin read, "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest." This was a direct insult to the most basic creed of Judaism: Yahweh is the God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. *You shall have no other gods before me*, says the first commandment. Do you begin to see how combustible this little story is from the get-go? The coin for the tax in question in itself represents a hated tax to a hated government and the very impression of the face of the coin breaks two holy commandments.

"Is it lawful to pay [this tax, using this evil coin] to Caesar or not?" Again, notice, the law referred to is left ambiguous, for the Pharisees want to trap Jesus. We could be talking the political law of Rome or the religious law of Moses. They are mixed up here,

already. Even before the question is asked. It is a powder keg. This is not simple question that the Pharisees have asked. This is a carefully constructed question, one composed by thoughtful advisors and tested by focus groups and opinion polls. It wasn't just a trick question. It was a wily, deathly trap. The Pharisees intended to catch Jesus in this trap. It was part of their conspiracy to get him arrested in a volatile situation that for the most part only just kept from blowing up. The *pax Romana* ("peace of Rome") was a delicate balance of heavy handed, violent imperialism and soft-touch, laissez faire latitude. If the subjects of the empire behaved themselves, they could enjoy certain rights and freedoms, especially of religion. But if they acted up, the ever-ready Roman legions would march in and squash them like bugs.

"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" The Pharisees ask, as innocently as possible. "Show me the coin used for the tax," Jesus says in reply. Somebody in the crowd had the coin, the denarius. The Pharisees wonder what Jesus thinks about the law of Moses. What does Jewish law, the law of the one true God, have to say about this controversial tax, a required of every subject of the empire by the law of an emperor in Rome who claims to be God Almighty? Well? If Jesus answers yes, it is lawful to pay the tax to Caesar, then the Jews who hate the Romans will include Jesus in their circle of hatred. If Jesus

answers no, it is not lawful to pay the tax to Caesar, then Roman patriots will include Jesus in their circle of hatred. If the answer is yes, pay the tax, the Jews might help get rid of Jesus. If the answer is no, don't pay the tax, Jesus is in trouble with the Romans. If the answer is yes, pay the tax, Jesus could be arrested by Jewish law and stoned as a blasphemer. If the answer is no, don't pay the tax, Roman law could find Jesus guilty of treason or sedition and the traitor to the state could be crucified.

What a lose-lose proposition! But, as we know, Jesus wins in the no-win tax debate. He skillfully avoids the trap. He does not allow them to draw him into their taboo mix of politics and religion. He does not let them corner him in that dark place where the ugliest part of politics, taxes, cavorts with the ugliest part of religion, namely the perversion that inspires people to hate in the name of God.

“Show me the coin for the tax,” Jesus says. They bring him the denarius. Then he answers their question with another question. “Whose head is this and whose title?” They say, “Caesar’s.”