



It is a fascinating conversation — the one Jesus has with these Pharisaic disciples and Herodians.

There is a back story, of course; there almost always is. In 63 b.c. the Roman general Pompey conquered Jerusalem and made the Jewish kingdom a client state of Rome.

In Jesus' day, three groups influenced how Jewish people thought of Rome and Romans.

The Herodians were allied with Rome, and became prosperous and influential because of it.

The Zealots were offended by Rome, and thought God's people should band together and rise up against the occupation.



The Pharisees held the middle ground, opposing both Roman rule and revolution.

So they take advantage of their neutrality, and try to capitalize on the division between the Herodians and the Zealots.

They ask Jesus, "Should Jewish citizens pay Roman taxes or not?" Expecting that if he chooses one position or another, members of the opposite group will lose interest in him.



Just to be clear: this isn't an argument between Republican and Democratic sensibilities.

It isn't an argument for bigger or smaller government;
For more or less taxes.

The Romans are an occupying force.

They virtually are holding the Jewish people captive.

And the question is: "Are we being untrue to God by supporting these invaders?"

Jesus could have answered in a number of ways.

He could have discussed the merits of both sides.

Is it more faithful to live within your situation and try to make a difference, or to use whatever force might be necessary to make change?

In some ways, it is the question of mid-1940s Germany.



Jesus doesn't make a case as to whether it is faithful to support an invading and occupying force, though.

Instead, he asks if they happen to have a coin of the Empire;
The only coin that could be used to pay the tax in question.

Then he questions his questioners:

"Whose head is this?"

"And whose title?"

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A little-noticed wrinkle in the conversation is that in St. Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus asks them "whose head is this?" the Greek word εἰκών (icon) is used. Jesus is questioning them about the iconography of the Roman Empire. He is asking about the images that have meaning for Romans. Also found on these coins is an engraved confession of Caesar's divinity — he is called "Son of God." This means that any Jew holding the coin is breaking the first commandment, Which prohibits the faithful from having other gods, or making images of other gods. This may very well be why they are amazed and leave him.

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"Whose head is this?" Jesus asks.
"Whose icon is this?"
Presuming the answer is, "The Emperor's," the follow-up question is, "What can the Emperor do with these coins?" Jesus teaches that the Emperor is perfectly free to do whatever he pleases with the coin that is minted in his image. If he demands taxes, taxes must be paid. And the Christian is free to comply.



But Jesus also uses this as an opportunity to make another point — a far more important point.
 Coins may be minted in the Emperor's image.
 But humans are minted in God's image.
 To those first century questioners, Jesus declares they should give back to the Emperor as many coins as they must.
 But they should give back to God even more.
 Returning their whole lives in faithfulness.
 Every action; every word; every decision; every relationship; every moment... pleasing to the one who makes it all possible.



You see what the problem is.
 These religious officials have forgotten who they are.
 They have forgotten in whose likeness they were made.
 In this morning's Gospel, Jesus calls them to remember who they are; to remember whose they are.
 They are children of God.
 Created by God.
 Created in the image of God.
 Created to be a sign of God's presence in this world.
 Charged to see that their whole lives give witness to the creative and renewing work God is seeking to do in this world.



Of course, this is not a struggle confined to the first century. The icons of society are a powerful influence on us today as well. We are tempted to imagine that we are self-made men and women.

That it is our hard work and our persistence and our creativity and our intelligence which has allowed us to become who we are.

When we begin to think in this way, we find ourselves aligned with the perspective of these Pharisees and Herodians. We might, like them, even push back a bit when we hear Jesus talk about how important it is for us to return our whole lives to God.



This is one of the reasons stewardship campaigns are so important.

Ours begins today.

Under the theme Grounded, Gracious and Generous, we'll explore how we might live more fully into the mission God has entrusted to us here at Saint Peter.

We're pretty excited about the possibilities.

You'll learn a bit more about this in a couple of minutes, when Angie Kleberger introduces Diana Huerta to us. Diana is the social worker we support at the Village Resource Center.

We're so grateful for her work, and how the Holy Spirit has moved through her, allowing her to become an instrument of God's love and care in this neighborhood.



But there is a greater purpose at hand here. Our commitments and contributions to Saint Peter are not only what make ministry possible through our congregation. They are also signs. Signs of our intent to return our whole lives to God. The Stewardship Team probably won't be thrilled to hear me say this, but Saint Peter actually doesn't need your money or mine... Nearly as much as you and I need to give it away. The amount you and I place in the offering plate each Sunday is an important beginning for us. A beginning as we strive to give our whole lives to God. Our faithfulness continues when we honor God with every action we take; every word we speak; every decision we make; every relationship we build; every moment we live.



In whose image are we made? Genesis teaches us we are made in God's image. Jesus says, "Give to God the things that are God's." What will that look like in your lives, and in mine? How will our support of Saint Peter be the beginning of our efforts? And where will it lead from there? Some pretty good questions to guide us into this stewardship season.

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Saint Peter
DEVOTIONAL GUIDE


Take It Home!

Let's keep the conversation going. Our hosts will have a 7-day devotional guide for you as you leave today. Question for this evening's conversation: "In my life, what are the things of the Emperor and what are the things of God?"

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So let's keep talking about it. As you leave today, our hosts have a 7-day devotional for you. We'll spend the next couple of days reflecting on this morning, and preparing ourselves for next Sunday.

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Saint Peter
DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

The Last Word

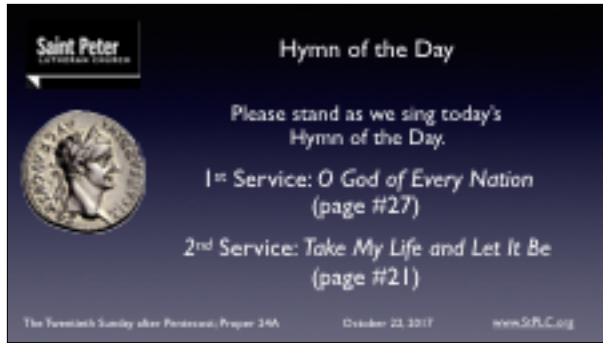
Avarice, greed, concupiscence and so forth are all based on the mathematical truism that the more you get, the more you have. The remark of Jesus that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35) is based on the human truth that the more you give away in love, the more you are. It is not just for the sake of other people that tells us to give rather than get, but for our own sakes too.

[Frederick Buechner]

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We haven't heard from Frederick Buechner for a while. Let's have him finish up today's sermon. Avarice, greed, concupiscence and so forth are all based on the mathematical truism that the more you get, the more you have. The remark of Jesus that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35) is based on the human truth that the more you give away in love, the more you are. It is not just for the sake of other people that Jesus tells us to give rather than get, but for our own sakes too. [Frederick Buechner]

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Saint Peter
LUTHERAN LITURGY

Hymn of the Day

Please stand as we sing today's
Hymn of the Day.

1st Service: O God of Every Nation
(page #27)

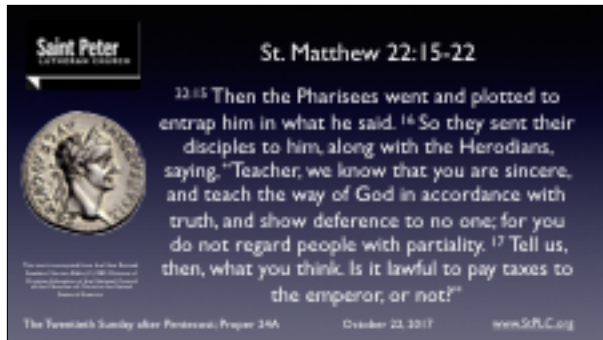
2nd Service: Take My Life and Let It Be
(page #21)

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This slide features a dark blue background with a gold coin of Saint Peter on the left. The text is centered and includes the title 'Hymn of the Day', a request to stand, and details for two services.

Please stand with us as we sing today's Hymn of the Day.
1st Service: O God of Every Nation
(page #27)
2nd Service: Take My Life and Let It Be
(page #21)

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Saint Peter
LUTHERAN LITURGY

St. Matthew 22:15-22

^{12,15} Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"


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Saint Peter
LITURGICAL LECTURE

St. Matthew 22:15-22



¹⁵ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁶ Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ¹⁷ Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" ¹⁸ They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." ¹⁹ When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

The Roman Empire was the first world power to span the entire Mediterranean basin. It was the first to create a common language, law, and culture across a vast territory. The emperor's head on the coin symbolizes the power and authority of the state.

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18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21 They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." 22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.