

We continue our Lenten Sermon Series of guiding us through Holy Week. Today we're on Tuesday of Holy Week. With the help of Jewish NT scholar, A.J. Levine, thus far we have explored the risks Jesus takes such as risking reputation at the triumphal entry and risking righteous anger in the Temple. Jesus is in Jerusalem, making his way to the cross and is just a few days away from his arrest. Here on this third Sunday of Lent- or on Tuesday of Holy Week- we're looking specifically at one of Jesus' teaching moments where he risks challenge. If any of you have ever taught you know how risky it is to teach. There's always the possibility that someone will misquote you or flat-out misunderstand what you have said. Jesus takes many risks teaching in the Temple. "He not only risks being misunderstood, he also risks being arrested. More, he is not only teaching people who want to learn; in the audience are some who want to trip him up with catch-22-type questions, and others who try to goad him into saying something controversial" (A.J. Levine, *Entering The Passion of Jesus*). Jesus' authority continues to be questioned. Today's text involves the first of three tests given to Jesus by some Pharisees and some supporters of Herod, called Herodians. They're trying to trap Jesus over a question concerning paying taxes. Jerusalem is in Israel, which is a Roman occupied territory. "The Romans let the Jews have their temple worship, but they are taxed unfairly to support the Roman capital, and they enjoy a few rights, because they are not truly Roman citizens" (*A Lectionary Sermon Series*, Vol. 1, Brian Erickson). If you think you don't like paying taxes, meet the residents of Jerusalem during Jesus' time. There were several taxes but the ones mentioned in today's text are poll taxes, which were based on the census and paid annually with one Roman coin, a denarion, which was a day's wage. This poll tax and other taxes were often unfair and especially put a heavy burden on the poor. Another

detail to note is that the Pharisees and the Herodians did not see eye to eye on anything politically. It would be like having the Tea Party and Bernie Sanders in the same room. Nonetheless, what brings this unlikely partnership together is their one commonality: getting rid of Jesus. So they plan the perfect question to trap him and send their intern disciples to do their dirty bidding. If Jesus answers **yes**, then the Romans will snatch Jesus up for being an instigator or for breaking the law. However, if Jesus answers **no**, then he risks alienating the oppressed Jews, many of whom were his followers, and the religious zealots in the crowd may just stone him for going against God's Word. It's a lose-lose situation for Jesus. So they all assume. This is where we pick up in today's story. Before we turn to God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

The Johnny Cash song, Satisfied Mind, that the band just played was co-written. One of the writers, Joe "Red" Hayes, says the idea for the song came originally from his mom but also from his father-in-law who quizzed him on who the richest person in the world was and then after a few wrong guesses informed him that it was in fact "the person with a satisfied mind." In my mind that equals to a clear conscience, and I have to say that is opposite of what is going on in today's text or in today's world when it comes to asking questions such as "How do we as Christians negotiate political spaces tactfully with oppressive regimes without legitimating them? How do we remain hopeful and committed to God's kingdom and its worldview in the face of persistent evil? What are the mechanisms- the coinage- we need to put in place in order to transform the current reality and bring about a different reality that would be more acceptable to God" (Raj Nadella, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org))?

Maybe we can wrestle with these questions and more as we turn to Jesus, the Master Teacher, who does it once again. With integrity and without fear, he changes the conversation and causes those listening to look within themselves. But first Jesus calls the Pharisees and the Herodians out. These unlikely opposing groups come together and offered fake compliments of Jesus before they posed their trick question. It's as if they said, "Bless your heart, Jesus" all while smiling and speaking their fake niceties. Professor Levine says that these guys remind her of cocky students. You know the ones. "They sit in the back row and ask obnoxious or off-topic questions, not because they want to know the answers, but because they want to show off, to look clever or daring in the eyes of their neighbors, or to show that they in fact know more than the teacher does" (Levine). I remember my first year as a campus minister at Vanderbilt. I had a senior ask to meet with me my office. He was so arrogant. He didn't think women should preach. He looked at the framed diplomas on my wall and said, "I bet those aren't even real!" And when I picked my mouth off the floor, gathered my thoughts, which included the thought that he couldn't become any more full of himself, he looked at a book on my shelf and stated loudly and proudly, "I bet you don't even know who BARTH is!" By the way, that theologian's name is pronounced "Bart" because he's Swiss, and the "h" is silent. I should've taken my cues from Jesus and tried to figure out what was behind his question and comments and responded with more empathy. What can I say? I'm on a learning journey as a disciple. Anyone with me? Unlike me though, Jesus not only demonstrated grace but had witnesses watching and hanging on his every word and reaction. The inauthenticity of this group of Pharisees and Herodians was palpable, and Jesus calls their bluff and sees through their sarcasm to their evil

motives. Yet, ironically, “each line of this insincere speech speaks truth about Jesus: He is true, he teaches the way of God, and he shows favoritism to no one, unlike the ‘hypocrites’ who pretend to praise him” (*FOW*, Susan Grove Eastman). Jesus asks them, “Why do you test me, you hypocrites?,” but it’s a rhetorical question, as Jesus and those gathered there already know the answer. Then Jesus requests to see the Roman coin used to pay this tax. This is a loaded and trapped request, as the Pharisees, who followed the religious law, weren’t supposed to have any Roman coins on them due to issues of idolatry- you know that graven image commandment. Now the pockets of Jesus, the true Son of God, are empty, but in one of his opponents’ pockets, lies a coin with a graven image on it. Surely they were embarrassed, though we aren’t told. Jesus asks for this particular coin because it has the image of Caesar on the front with the inscription, “Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus” and on the back were Latin words meaning “high priest” (*Levine*). Again, Jesus knows what is happening here and with the coin present, he asks, “Whose image and inscription is this?” (v. 20). Of course they reply, “Caesar’s.” Talk about a back fire on “Stump the Teacher?” There’s no comeback.

“The denarius is Roman propaganda: it says that Caesar is divine, that Caesar has power, that Caesar has, and is, money. Power, divinity, and empire- they are all minted from the same mold. Jesus seeks a different mint, a different mold” (*Levine*). So then Jesus replies, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God” (v. 21). With this answer, they can’t really accuse Jesus of not following the Roman law. And they surely can’t say that Jesus is going against God’s Word. But did you notice though that Jesus didn’t REALLY answer the

question? Instead, he poses a question of his own, asking his questioners to decide what they think belongs to God and what they think belongs to Caesar. In other words, “Live **with** the emperor but live **for** God” (workingpreacher.org, Rolf Jacobson). While paying taxes to Rome was an obligation, giving to God was and is because of a calling and commitment to promote the alternative kingdom. The text tells us that after hearing Jesus’ response, they left astonished. Maybe they heard the Psalmist words echoing in their minds and hearts as they departed? “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it” (24:1). Or maybe they knew that they had nothing on Jesus?! That is, until, as we see in Luke’s Gospel, false accusations are made saying that Jesus “perverted Rome when he forbid people from paying taxes” (23:2). “Words can be twisted, and teaching, as well as any political statement, comes with risk” (Levine).

It’s also important to note what Jesus didn’t say here. “He doesn’t say that there are two distinct realms, the religious and the secular, and that they require our equal fidelity. What he says is far more subtle and complicated: the coin is already Caesar’s- there’s his face stamped right on it- so give it to him. But then consider the much harder question: What belongs to God? What kind of tribute do we owe to God” (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net)? This is bigger than a tax, bigger than a picture on a coin. This is a question of what/who belongs to God. To whom do we belong? It’s hard to ignore the connection from the opening of God’s words in Genesis (1:26) that we are created by God and bear God’s image. As Christ’s disciples we’re called to be a different kind of people whose lives bear witness to Jesus in ways that the world finds astonishing, perplexing, and unrecognizable. We’re created and claimed by God; therefore, how we treat one

another matters to God. Where we spend our allegiance matters to God. “The coin of our day bears the image of dead presidents, but each of us bears another” (workingpreacher.org, Lance Pape). When I look at Jesus to think about how to practice my faith in the political realm, I see no path to glory that sidesteps humility, surrender, and sacrificial love (Thomas).

I saw sacrificial love on a grand scale in the news the last two weeks: The death of Mr. Alexi Navalny of Russia was announced. He was someone who stood for the neighbor against the tyrant- Stood against Putin for the people and he surely was living out of God’s economy. Two weeks ago he was allegedly killed by the Russian government. And if that’s the case, then he was assassinated. Among the many issues where he stood against Putin, the most recent was the Ukraine war. Mr. Navalny condemned the invasion of Ukraine as “a crazy enterprise built on lies.” He was a Christian...Russian Orthodox flavored. And perhaps even more deeply disturbing to me is that the church designated to host his funeral has donated to the Russian Army and enthusiastically advertised its backing for the war. “Navalny spoke at various times of his religious faith and one of his last legal battles from inside prison was for the right to have a Bible and book of psalms in his cell. He said, ‘Most people are atheists, I myself was a militant atheist. But now I am a believer, and this helps me because everything becomes easier. I ponder less, have fewer dilemmas - there is a book (the Bible) that clearly states what needs to be done in each situation. It's not always easy to follow, but generally speaking, I try’” ([Reuters](#), Feb. 2024). Many worried what kinds of last words the clergy would say over Mr. Navalny’s life. They did not expect them to be words about his courage or his excellence. Yes, Alexi Nalvany lived out of God’s economy...had his

taxes figured out. He paid the ultimate tribute to the Everlasting Emperor (Trish Gwinn). Can't say the same for the church. Standing in sacred space, they were pulling coins out of their pockets with Caesar's head on them. Yes, we pay a price when we risk challenge. Do not give to Caesar more than the Caesar is due. Do not give Caesar your faith, or your hope in the future. Do not give Caesar your ultimate allegiance. Do not forge a relationship with Caesar that forces you to figure out how God can rightly fit into Caesar's pocket. Do not give to Caesar what belongs to God, which as the psalmist reminds us that the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. It is all God's (Daniel Berrigan).

Baptism is the watermark of our true currency" (*FOW*, Spalding). Therefore, as Christ's disciples, our first loyalty is to a kingdom that will remain long after earthly empires rise and fall. Jesus tells us that how we act on earth makes a difference. We, too, must risk challenge. "Figuring out my taxes is the easy part. What's much harder is living out my political convictions with a Christlike humility, with a compassion that embraces my political others as a sibling. But if I really belong to God, if I really am fashioned in God's image, then I need to practice my faith and my politics in a way that reflect who God is. It's not a question of backing down or being dishonest or watering down my beliefs. It's a question of remembering that the God whose image I bear- whose image you also bear- is a God of endless and sacrificial love. So, in short, give God everything" (Thomas)! Amen.