

*15Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16So 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. 17Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21They 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." 22When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.*

He was a Vietnam veteran. He was speaking to the pastors of the Cleveland West Conference of the Northeast Ohio Synod of the ELCA. This is what I heard him saying, "When I was in battle Jesus' words about turning the other cheek meant nothing to me. It was kill or be killed. I prayed that God would keep me safe but I could not think about praying for my enemy. It was him or me." That day no one in the room told him he was wrong. I wish I could have. I wish I could have found a way to say to him that Jesus' words are absolute – always to be followed in every situation. But when the thieves are prowling my neighborhood I am grateful that there are police officers ready to do violence to protect me.

I think the Pharisees knew the answer to the question they posed for Jesus. They knew that to have anything to do with the Roman coin with the image of the emperor upon it and the inscription declaring the emperor to be divine was wrong. God's law made it clear that the Lord alone was God – God's people were to bow down to no other.

The Herodians knew the answer to that question as well. Cooperate. Pay taxes – get along with the Romans – Romans were the ones God had put in charge of Jerusalem. God should be honored in the religious world, but the political world belonged to the emperor.

The disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians came to Jesus 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. Tell us, then, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

They began by buttering him up. Though their words may not have been sincere, they were true. But Jesus aware of their malice said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” Whose head is this and whose title? The emperor’s? Then “give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

Dilemma solved. It is the emperor’s coin – pay your taxes. Simple.

Maybe.

Once there was a ruler named Adolph. He used the taxes of Christians to transport Jews to the places where they were killed. Once there was a ruler named Joseph. He used the money he exacted from the people to gather up Lutherans living in the Ukraine and transported them to work camps in Siberia where most of them died. Less than forty years after Jesus gave his answer a Roman emperor would use tax money to send his troops to destroy the very temple Jesus was in that day.

“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

The government prints the money – but in whose image were you made? How much of you is to be given to God?

Most all of us are citizens of the United States of America. Two hundred and fifty years ago none of our ancestors were. Two hundred and fifty years from now who knows if any of our descendents will be. But in this moment of time we are citizens of this land. How much of our allegiance do we owe to this nation that is our nation?

We are Christians. We believe that Jesus Christ is the way and the truth and the life. How much of our allegiance do we owe to Jesus.

Jesus could have been a fanatic that day when he was asked this question. Many in Jerusalem at that time were fanatics – intent on establishing God’s proper rule over Jerusalem – intent on driving out the Romans by force. Jesus was hung on the cross between two fanatics – Romans reserved crucifixion for those who were rebelling against Roman rule. Jesus was crucified with a sign that said, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” A political title. But

from what the gospels tell us Jesus was neither a nationalist intent on overthrowing Roman rule nor a collaborator with Rome. In every way Jesus took his direction from God.

It led to the cross - to death. In a kill or be killed world Jesus died on the cross. David brought the giant Goliath crashing down to his death but Jesus died on the cross. The God who once had commanded the army of Israel to slaughter every man and woman and child and animal in the city they were to conquer raised the crucified one from death. The same God who had once sent a flood to destroy a sin-filled creation raised the crucified one from death. Noah was not raised from death, nor Moses. David was not raised from death nor Solomon. But Jesus who took his direction from God was declared Son of God by his resurrection from the dead.

You and I need to decide how to be faithful to God and good citizens of the nation that is our own. Sometimes it is more than we can do to be both at the same time.

But God has promised to judge us all by Jesus love and faithfulness. Though that Vietnam vet said he left Jesus words behind in his killing Jesus did not abandon him. Finally that is what will matter. Amen.