

31st Sunday 2017

Matthew 23: 1-12; Matthew 22: 15-21

Questions people asked Jesus. Questions asked by enemies with evil intent.

By what authority do you speak and act?

How will you prove your claims?

Should we pay taxes or not? Should we withhold when we disagree?

What is the ultimate commandment?

They seem sincere. But you see their trickiness. The either/or form is dangerous. Truth is often not what it seems; it is rarely either/or.

Manner of response to question: various, from Jesus and from us. (1) Verbal sparring: “on guard!” (2) Blistering excoriation, used in today’s gospel, standard procedure today. The least effective type; does it change anyone? Jesus seems to be having a bad day. (3) Sorrowful disappointment, as when Jesus wept: paralyzing, and, for us, currently widespread. (4) Acceptant surrender to consequences of challenging the system: seemingly ineffective and seldom tried; yet the way Jesus chose in Gethsemane. By it he overcame his enemies.

Impossible choices make me tired. Why must people go for the jugular? Why are there trolls on the internet? On the other hand, debate can make us think. It can ignite the imagination and bring us insight.

The question sparking most thought in recent gospels: “Should we pay taxes or not?” Knowing their malice, Jesus took a coin and said.... Considering my own malice yet knowing you are not out to get me, I tried it.

This 1922 U.S. Liberty silver dollar was given to my mother on her eighth birthday. Why did she not buy the doll or bracelet her parents could not afford? I’m not sure; it’s too late to ask. Did the coin lie buried in family drawers ninety-five years, for use on this rainy Sunday morning?

Mystery is puzzling; answers gratifying. I want to flip the coin and find out—heads or tails. I won’t catch it if you are watching. Life is *not* arbitrary if God is involved. Jesus did not flip heads or tails.

What was he thinking when he said, “Give Caesar what is Caesar’s; give God what is God’s”? There is a bank-vault of ancient wisdom about two sides of the coin: obverse and reverse. As story teller himself, did Jesus think of Aesop’s fable and its moral: “Every coin has two sides; you must look at both before committing to one or the other”? As philosopher, did he think of Aristotle: “Genius and madness are two sides of the same coin”? This could be said of Jesus’ ultimate choice, in Gethsemane, to go through with it. As spiritual genius did he think of his colleague, Lao Tzu: “Life and death are one coin, viewed from different sides.”

In our present crisis, political questions become spiritual questions. This is very painful. The sides of the coin are very far from each another: splitting apart as by nuclear fission. A retired Senate majority leader, not the present one, said, “Although regularly asked to do so, God does not take sides in American politics.” I have a tough time with that. I cannot imagine God is on the other side of the coin from mine. Could you pray that I warm towards the idea?

The late Justice Antonin Scalia, brother Catholic, surprised me, saying, “Until courts decided, public debate over same-sex marriage showed American democracy at its best. Passionately yet respectfully, individuals on both sides of the coin tried to persuade their neighbors to accept their views.” Scalia may be hinting, God doesn’t *exactly* take the side we think he should.

More wisdom: “No matter how flat you make your pancake, look before pouring the syrup, it still has two sides.” Spiritual truth at breakfast from Daniel Tosh at Comedy Central.

Did Jesus' comic eye sparkle when he asked to see that coin? Was he teasing? Was he trying to say, *Live life*; stop trying to figure it all out. We wrongly make the Lord pompous. His laughter would be marvelous to hear. Why is our piety so pretentious?

Katee Sackhoff, action-film star, about scantily-clad fight-scenes: "I like to think I'm a strong, tough person, but I'm not. I'm a needy person. Insecure. Impressionable. But there is a side of me put-together, strong, capable, opinionated. They are the two sides of myself." They produce [Lieutenant Starbuck Thrace](#) on *Battlestar Galactica*. When you are needy and tough at the same time, Christ can work with you. As with Peter or the Magdalene, as with me or you. If only needy, only tough, you won't make spiritual progress.

You are exasperated (I can tell) with all this talk of both sides of the coin. Why not choose, take a stand? Stop being wishy-washy. The writer Salman Rushdie, himself a Muslim, wrote a novel called *The Satanic Verses*. It is a great imaginative work but offended fundamentalist thinking about the prophet. Ayatollah Khomeini sentenced Salman Rushdie to death; millions were offered to kill him. There have been close calls; he still requires bodyguards. Salman Rushdie says, "The artist must take sides, reject frauds, start arguments, wake up the world."

We are called to be artists of our lives, as followers of Jesus. We have to make peace but fight the good fight. It is a tightrope act, without easy answers. We have to live with tension. Give Caesar what is Caesar's; give God what is God's. The advice is conventional, contrived, true only as far as it goes. We have to pay taxes. But we don't really know what we must give God. Especially if this means giving the self, giving, like the two-coin widow, "all we have."

The United Church of Christ reminds us on their billboards, God is still speaking. Speaking in unexpected places and quirky ways. A modern Taoist teacher says, forget the coin's sides and look at the roundness of its edge. He compares the coin to a table, reminding Catholics of the altar. Perhaps an altar should be round like King Arthur's table, like this coin. Let's pretend. Let's pretend the altar is like a kitchen table where you eat with your loved ones, or invisible loved ones if you live alone. Like the table where close friends sat in the upper room.

Taoist teacher, Deng Ming-Dao, says, "The traditional family table is round. No corners. No sides. No head. No tail. The top is smooth. Food is in the center, and each family member reaches the same distance for a helping. Someone you love is next to you on each side. No one is first. No one is last. The person farthest from you is the person facing you."

Conflicts can resolve when both sides sit together and share a meal at a round table. Inner tensions can resolve when conflicting sides of yourself sit together and hear each other out. It puts you with Jesus in the upper room. There was no argument at that table. It was a safe place. There love changed everything.

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