



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
October 18, 2020

“As the World Discerns”
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block
Matthew 22:15-22

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¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus 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?”

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.

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I grew up watching Telenovelas. These are Spanish language soap operas – *and there’s a difference*. Telenovelas are even more intense than your average English-language: “As the World Turns.” These gems are jam-packed with twice the tears, twice the drama, and those must-have close-up pauses are held for twice as long. I always tell people that Telenovelas are a great way to learn or improve your Spanish, because the acting is so over the top, that you can really follow *every* moment.

I remember as a kid sitting in the kitchen with my babysitter after school, glued to the TV, tears falling down our faces as we watched Javiera leave Alonso, or were in shock when Juan confessed that he was actually Jose’s evil twin, or sat at the edges of our seats as wicked Carla plotted her revenge on her lover, Manuel.

Now, a lot of people don’t know this about me, but I actually was a Telenovela star for a brief time. Now when I say star, think less bright and up in front, and a more a star in the sky of millions of stars. You see, in college, I interned for a summer for a Madrid-based telenovela called *Motivos Personales*. It was a dramatic show and my first big break. Can you see me? [Video clip is shown] ⁱ Could you find me? Let’s rewind. *Nope, I’m not the lady in glasses. No, not that person either. Not them. There!* That is your pastor’s forehead. Anyway, as promising as it seemed, my career took a different turn (*and no regrets*).

But back to the point, Telenovelas are suspenseful and wicked and wonderful. And whether or not the plot is riveting or ridiculous, we can't help but keep watching, because we want to know: *what will happen next?*

This week's text could fit perfectly into an afternoon Telenovela. Of course, on this show, *Jesus* would look like a young Antonio Banderas, and the Pharisees and Herodians would all have great blow outs, chic robes, and three pounds of foundation. There would be a tight close up on their faces. One would ask, sternly: *¿Está permitido pagar impuestos al César o no?* Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Then the music would intensify. Close up on *Jesus*. Heavy breathing. And then - *commercial break!*

Like all good Telenovela fans, this is the point when we would turn down the volume and...discuss! *What do you think Jesus will do?* Here we have our hero divided among his siblings in the faith, and the question that is being posed to him *is a trap!* No matter how he responds, he is in BIG trouble with either the Pharisees or the Herodians.

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In the midst of such a tumultuous, divisive political season, we probably find ourselves especially intrigued by this dramatic scene. We want to see if *Jesus* will handle the pressure of this "first century" town hall question. And we are curious to hear *Jesus's* opinion on the import of taxes. But if we take a step back, we may find that this question is less about dollars and denarii, and more about loyalty and faith. *What does Jesus value? Where does Jesus put His trust? And for us, as Christians, where are called to invest our time, our talents, our whole selves?*

To offer some context: the Pharisees were the religious authorities of the time, and the Herodians were an influential political party. Both were Jewish groups that were often at odds with one another. That being said, they DID have something crucial in common. They both were given authority under Roman rule, and so had a special interest in maintaining the status quo – and thus silencing this "Jesus, "who was trying to turn the empire upside down.

Furthermore, the taxes that they are asking *Jesus* about are not taxes in general. Marginalized Jews during this time paid numerous taxes: temple taxes, land taxes, customs taxes, and more. The tax they are speaking about here is a deeply controversial one: it is the imperial tax, paid as a tribute to Rome to support the occupation of Israel. *That's right, Jews were forced to pay a tax to their oppressors, in order to fund their own oppression!* So, of course, this tax was loathed by many.

Now, back to the action! "*Hípocritas! Hypocrites,*" *Jesus* cries, or shouts, or says under his breath. Instead of a straightforward answer to the question, he asks his challengers to produce a coin. This coin contains the image of Caesar and an inscription that claims Caesar's divinity as the Son of God. The word for image in Greek is "eikon" (which is where we get the English word "icon"). Thus, the coins used to pay this tax, not only represented

an economic and political order dominated by Rome, but also a worldview where Caesar is equated to God.

Jesus is in a real bind here. If he answers 'yes' to the question of paying the imperial tax, he risks alienating his fellow oppressed Jewish people. On top of that, the Pharisees could accuse him of idolatry for breaking the first commandment – and recognizing Caesar as God. If he disagrees with this tax, he could be accused of sedition, and the empire-supporting Herodians could have him arrested for attempting to undermine Rome. It is a double-edged sword. *And he knows it.*

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But then comes the classic Telenovela twist: *Jesus* does something clever and unexpected. He offers both a concrete and nuanced answer (and one that has sparked many centuries of debate). He says: "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Like a polished teacher, Christ cleverly turns the question back on his challengers – back on us. His response leaves us to sort through our own loyalties, duties and shared calling: What is for Caesar and what is for God? What is our commitment to government and what is our commitment to Church? How are we called to see and value and serve these two powerful entities (that can sometimes feel so at odds with one another)?

Over the past 2000 years, this text has been read and reread in countless ways. It has been used to support taxes and to give to the poor. It has been used to justify submission to government, and rebellion from that same government. Should prayer be relegated to our houses of worship OR should it be allowed in public settings? Who can best handle the needs of the most vulnerable in Asheville: pastors or politicians? Should people of faith be sitting in the pews or marching on the frontline? Or both?

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The late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg always had a phrase from the Book of Deuteronomy hanging on her wall: "*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*: justice, justice you will pursue." This perhaps summed up her calling perfectly as both a jurist and a Jew.

Born in Brooklyn in 1933, she was the daughter of a Russian immigrant father and first-generation American mother. A Jewish family living in a time when Anti-Semitism was rampant and widely accepted, Ruth experienced first-hand the challenges of being both a member of a religious minority and being an ambitious woman trying to make it in America.

Ruth saw being Jewish here as having a place in society in which you're always reminded that you are an outsider. And although she was never *especially* devout, she clung to Judaism's emphasis on bringing justice to a broken world. Her lived experience as an outsider, and her hunger for justice, informed her work and passion for shaping law.

She argued six gender discrimination cases before the Supreme Court. She pushed for the court to no longer hear cases on Yom Kippur (the holiest day of the Jewish calendar). And as we know, she went on to become a sort of cultural icon in her later years – acquiring the nickname “the Notorious RBG.”

“She tried to work *through* the system,” said journalist, Jane Eisner. “She very much believed in institutions and incremental change. That’s an outgrowth of her experience as a Jew.”ⁱⁱ

Justice Ginsburg’s connection to Judaism helped fuel her life’s calling, and deepened her belief in government’s *capacity* to protect and care for the marginalized and the vulnerable. And she was willing to put the work in – until the very end.

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Speaking with you this morning, I know that we are a firestorm of emotions these days. We may be feeling: defeated, fired up, numb, angry, lonely, lost. The recent headlines are overwhelming - not to mention the headlines in our own lives. Church and state feel pitted against each other: somehow too intertwined, somehow too distinct. The aisle feels wider than ever. Friends feel further away. Violence about black and brown bodied people is not slowing down. Guaranteed rights and protections for LGBTQIA+ civilians are *so* needed. The balance of school and work and childcare feels like too much to handle. COVID quarantine living has become all too familiar. And as the weather gets colder, we are growing weary and desperate for each other.

In the midst of such a trying season, how can we answer Jesus’ challenge to discern what we value and trust most? As Christians? As Americans? As a church family? Where do we invest our energy? *Who* do we serve and *how* do we serve?

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When the Pharisees and Herodians approach Jesus, they are confident that their question will trap and trick him. Instead, he says: “Show me the coin used for the tax.” And looking down at his palm, he sees Caesar’s face stamped on the tiny piece of tinted metal. The coin bears the image of the emperor, but the palm that holds that coin bears the image of God.

Third century, Christian scholar Tertullian explains Jesus’ words and actions this way: “Render to Caesar Caesar’s image, which is on the coin, and to God God’s image, which is on the [person].” In short, coins may have monetary, worldly value to Caesar, but humanity has substantive, spiritual value to God.

And when you think about it, with the whole world - and everything in it - resting in the palm of God’s hands, there not much left for Caesar to claim for himself. For all things, all people, all systems, all empires and emperors - everything there is - including us, *belong to God*.

It is no wonder Jesus' challengers leave "*amazed.*" Jesus' subtle and substantial answer to their interrogation teaches us invaluable lessons about government AND God – and about how we shape beloved community.

Each formed uniquely in God's image, we serve Christ *first*; and it is through Christ, that we are able to serve the world. We are part of God's divine economy, if you will, sent to be Christ's hands and feet, fully invested in shaping and shifting the status quo. We are called to pray AND to march! To feed the hungry AND to exercise our right to vote! To phone our friends who are grieving AND our representatives who are discerning. To support the ministries of our church AND the many essential programs of our nation.

To be made in God's image means we are called to give and engage as Christ did: to discern how we each can lift up the marginalized, welcome the stranger, stand with the suffering, work for justice, love bravely, act courageously, and risk *everything* in order to bring about God's kingdom here and now.

James Cone, the Father of Black Liberation Theology, says this:

"The Christian community, is that community that freely becomes oppressed, because they know that Jesus himself has defined humanity's liberation in the context of what happens to the little ones. Christians join the cause of the oppressed in the fight for justice, not because of some philosophical principle of "the Good" or because of a religious feeling of sympathy for people in prison. Sympathy does not change the structures of injustice. The authentic identity of Christians with the poor is found in the claim which the Jesus-encounter lays upon their own life-style, a claim that connects the word "Christian" with the liberation of the poor."ⁱⁱⁱ

To value God IS to value the world: to be willing to invest in it, to shape it, even to turn it upside down. Indeed, as this Stewardship season takes flight and this election season treads on, we are called to "keep the faith:" to give to God in all the ways we can, and to invest in this Church without walls, hungry to mend the brokenness and build beloved community.

Friends, we must never fear Jesus' Telenovela trap question. We can't be distracted by all that drama that tries to block the path toward justice or silence the truth. Instead, we should face the world's challenges with bold faith, asking God: *where shall I go? Where can you send me? How can I serve you? What more can I give? What more can we do?*

There is One who holds us in the palm of Her hand,
May we trust that God gives us everything we need –
to heal the wounds of injustice and shake up the world.

¹ *Motivos Personales* Video clip: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=e8z7YU1yDsc> (minutes: 10:25 – 10:30)

² Yonat Shimron. The Washington Post: "*Ruth Bader Ginsburg was shaped by her minority faith.*" September 19, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/ruth-bader-ginsburg-was-shaped-by-her-minority-faith/2020/09/19/45f02f3e-fa9d-11ea-85f7-5941188a98cd_story.html

³ James Cone. *God of the Oppressed*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books. 1975