Sermon, October 18, 2026
The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

Despite all of my searching, I could find no commentaries to support the idea that the wonder of this pericope from Matthew this morning is that there was a time when people still carried coins

Alas

“give therefore to Caesar,” or rather as many of us know this text from the King James Version of the Bible: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.”

A well-known verse from the Bible which makes it all the more important that we dive into it to really make sure we’re taking into consideration the context of the text and our context to find meaning in what Jesus is trying to convey

Matthew’s story of Jesus this morning takes place in a time when there were heightened political tensions not totally dissimilar to the times we’re in now where we are bombarded from all sides with political ads begging for our allegiance

It wasn’t an election they were facing then – those didn’t exist in Jesus’ context of the tyrannical empire of Rome – so it’s not candidates who are vying for authority and control, but there are factions – in the church and in the state – who were vying for the peoples’ allegiance

Two such factions are the ones who approach Jesus in this story: The Pharisees who were religious leaders at odds with Rome, and the Herodians who were Roman sympathizers

Matthew warns us in his telling of this story, that these two factions join forces – odd bedfellows they may be – to “entrap” Jesus

This is not an encounter to see whose side Jesus is on – both sides kind of hated Jesus and so partnering together to get rid of him or discredit him seemed to carry some appeal

But let's be quite clear – this was intended to be a trap

So, let us not think that the question holds much merit - it's rather unlikely that either side was *seriously* questioning the legality of taxes, they just knew it was a hot button issue and they could entrap Jesus with such a question…or so they thought

"Is it lawful," they ask, "to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

Is it lawful – not "is it good," not "is it right," not even "would you recommend" – but, is it lawful?

If he says "yes" he could be perceived as a Roman sympathizer and the crowd who have followed him for months now would feel misled and be severely discouraged

If he says "no" the Herodians could claim he is engaging in sedition which would certainly expedite his arrest and trial and be a quick way to get rid of him

It's a trap!

…and somehow, the answer Jesus gave the Pharisees and Herodians – and all within earshot – amazed them and they walk away

What does he say? That famous line

Well, first, he asks for a coin – it's a Roman coin, of course, because they live in a Roman colony

And they can produce it upon request, of course, because they are residents of a Roman colony and need coins to purchase things – like I said, this isn't a scripture text about how we now pay for things with our phones

He asks for a coin, which they can produce because they use it and need it for daily life, he looks at it and then asks them whose head is depicted on the coin – whose image does the coin bear?

The answer is the current Roman ruler, who has the name of other Roman rulers: “Caesar”

And then we get the famous line: “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

To me, the thing that “amazed” the Pharisees and the Herodians is as simple as Jesus’ use of a coordinating conjunction: “and”

“Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s ***and*** to God the things that are God’s.”

The grammar website, Grammarly, notes that coordinating conjunctions “connect words, phrases, or independent clauses of equal grammatical importance in a sentence.”[1]

connect phrases of *equal* grammatical – or in this case, theological and political – importance in a sentence

“Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s ***and*** to God the things that are God’s.”

For many Christians, we get caught up in the first half of Jesus’ response – “OMG! Jesus just said to pay taxes!” – that we start to see the “and” as a dividing wall between the civil world and the religious world

Give to Caesar – and/wall – give to God

[1] https://www.grammarly.com/blog/parts-of-speech/conjunctions/

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Separate ideas

But “and” is a coordinating conjunction *connecting* phrases of *equal* importance – one full sentence with no wall in between

Give to Caesar – participate in the world around you which is political and social and economic – and Give to God – participate in bringing God’s kingdom on earth which is political and social and economic

This is what amazed those Pharisees and Herodians – they tried to trap Jesus, and instead, Jesus doesn’t compromise his deep, deep beliefs and sense of purpose and he doesn’t deny the realities of the world in which he and the people he loves so dearly live and move and have their being

This response from Jesus isn’t just about the “lawful” use of money, as if that’s the only way to use it, but rather Jesus hints at a bigger expectation about the *right* use of money, too

Jesus doesn’t shy away from talking about money in the Bible

He tells many good stories about money – Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan? In the parable, the Samaritan uses some of his money to pay for the hotel and care of the man beaten and left for dead on the side of the road

There are also stories of how Jesus saw the corruption that can take place with money – like when he flipped the tables in the temple in Jerusalem when he observed the deceit that took place there as people purchased their offerings with money

Jesus’ relationship to and feelings about money is nuanced, but I wouldn’t say it’s neutral

Raj Nadella, Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia, notes that “while people pay taxes to Rome out of

obligation, they ‘pay’ to God because of their calling and their commitment to promote an alternative kingdom.”[2]

For me, this gets to the difference Jesus is insinuating in his response to the Pharisees and the Herodians

“You asked, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar and of course it is the law” Jesus says, “but have you ever heard of the kingdom of God? And do you know what God’s kingdom asks of you not out of obligation or ‘law’ but out of a sense of calling and commitment to God's vision?”

And, for Jesus, the “payment” we make to God may be some of those very coins that are used for taxes – or other financial obligations in this capitalist society in which we live because, again, Jesus doesn’t condemn our need to use money to exist in the political, social, and economic system in which we live

But, it’s very likely, Dr. Nadella points out that “the ‘coinage’ of God’s kingdom is of a radically different nature than that of Caesar…Which is why, while people must pay to both Caesar and God, they must pay them not only for different reasons but in entirely different currencies.”

the “coinage” of God’s kingdom – that which has the “face” of God imprinted on it – is us: our love, our joy, our justice, our mercy, our advocacy, our seeking to ensure our communities care for our neighbors as God calls us to be cared for, and yes even our money

If Jesus had answered the Pharisees and Herodians by swapping his answer – “Give therefore to God what is God’s and give to Caesar what is Caesar’s” – would they have walked away amazed?

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[2] https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-29/commentary-on-matthew-2215-22-7

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It would have been a little more clear the order of operations I think Jesus truly desires of us – give to God *first, and* give to Caesar

But, Jesus could see the trap coming a mile away and it's a trap society still tries to lay for faithful citizens by pitting the church and the state against each other as if they are not mutually influenced

Jesus recognized that there are requirements of the law and of civil society *and* there is a vision of the world that God has placed in our hearts and into the universe that is beyond the confines of civil laws

The laws say we must pay taxes, *and* to build up God's kingdom money can be a helpful tool for lifting up the lowly, bringing community together, and feeding ourselves and those in need physically and spiritually

The laws say guns are legal, *and* to build up God's kingdom we need to find a way to stop the tragedies that befall our communities when they are used for harm

The laws say there is a separation of church and state, *and* to build up God's kingdom it matters that the rules that govern our communities are based in love, grace, mercy, and kindness

Jesus' relationship to money and the "coinage" of the state is nuanced, but it is not neutral

And we are called, not obligated - called, to utilize the "coinage" of God's kingdom to bring about the beloved community that God has envisioned for us
May it be so, Amen.