

Coins, Emperors, and Everything Else

October 18, 2020 (Proper 24A)
The Rev. Scott Walters

Sometimes it's not such a bad thing to be put in your place. Now there are plenty of places on earth where I'd rather not be put. Even if a pandemic didn't require the avoidance of crowds, shopping malls would make my short list of places generally to be avoided. They would land somewhere between dentists' chairs and group insurance seminars, or even worse: *webinars*, which I didn't know was a word before COVID-19.

Forgive me. Not only have I alienated the dentists and insurance agents, I've also probably lost all those perfectly decent people who just like to hang out at the mall. But hear me out. This isn't a rant about the evils of shopping. I just don't like the buildings.

Maybe it's the lighting. Maybe it's the muzak. Maybe it's something piped in through the ductwork or bubbling in the fountains. Whatever it is I always feel disoriented as soon as I step into a mall. I knew where I was when I drove up. But suddenly my internal compass goes haywire and I start scanning for one of those directories that they put up every so often for poor lost souls like me. When I find one I rush over and start looking... not for north or south. Not for the letter of the parking lot where I left my car, which I will have forgotten already. What I look for is that big red arrow that says "YOU ARE HERE." The mall doesn't get smaller, but I feel better. Mercifully, I've been put in my place. I'm right here. Now I can begin to make my way through this strange fluorescent maze.

What we read today in Matthew's gospel seems to be one of those tidy, almost perfectly satisfying little stories that, frankly, we don't seem to get very often from Jesus. The story is pleasing because Jesus puts those Pharisees so squarely in their places.

If we come to the story unprepared to read "Pharisees" as the Snidely Whiplash characters or generic bad guys here, Matthew makes sure we know that they were up to no good. He tells us that they were plotting to entrap Jesus. We can see them now, huddled in a small, dark circle, rubbing their hands and sneering over their shoulders. We know whom to root for in this confrontation. And Jesus doesn't let us down. Jesus wins the argument yet again. Imaging that!

But what if Jesus wasn't as interested in winning this contest as we are? What if he was more concerned about orienting these people? Putting them in their place, not to spite them so much, but locating them in the universe a little like I needed to be, bless my heart, at the entrance to the mall.

In my Bible this passage is set off by a confident heading in italics: *The Question of Paying Taxes*. And for all the centuries that Christians have been reading Matthew's gospel account, conscientious readers have wrestled with what Jesus might be telling us about our relationship to our governments and to our money.

Some devout Christian citizens have withheld some of their taxes because they cannot in good conscience give money to support the waging of war. Others have withheld some of their taxes because they cannot in good conscience give money that might fund abortions. People in both camps struggle with Jesus's words, wondering about what he might be telling us 21st century Americans about what we give to the Emperor and what we give to God, particularly given how offensive we find some of Caesar's behavior.

Fair enough. Maybe one of the things the story is about is *The Question of Paying Taxes*. But we Christians have missed the gospel ship from time to time by reducing Jesus's teaching to paragraph headings. There is that other story that we insist on calling the parable of the prodigal son that's really about the forgiving father, you know. And in the same way, I wonder if this story is less about what belongs to the emperor than it is about what belongs to God.

If we read this story as a melodrama then we expect the whole scene to end with the Pharisees and the Herodians humiliated, shuffling off in defeat. But the text simply says that they were amazed. And in Matthew's

gospel the people who are amazed are usually those who have caught a startling glimpse of who Jesus really is. People who suddenly sense there is something astonishingly new at work in the world in him.

Jesus stills a storm and the frightened disciples in the boat are *amazed* and ask one another, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” The lame, the maimed, the blind, and the mute are brought to Jesus’s feet, and they leave him speaking and whole and walking and seeing and the crowds are *amazed* saying, “We’ve never seen anything like this in Israel before.” What if the amazement of the Pharisees was at least partly the amazement of all these other witnesses? What if instead of just sending them reeling, Jesus opened their eyes a little? What if he put them in their place and they suddenly saw their world as it really was, and their true place within it, if only for a moment?

I’ve long felt that this is a story that begs to be entered visually. We’ve seen the Pharisees plotting and heard the malice behind their questions. And then Jesus asks for the coin. He doesn’t talk about coins in general. He asks for one in particular. “Show me the coin used for the tax,” he says. So they bring him a denarius, and we see the little silver piece drop into his open hand.

“Whose head is this,” he asks, “And whose title?” “The emperor’s,” they respond, correctly, if a little weakly. “This insignificant metal bit, with the emperor’s likeness hammered out on its surface. Yes, you can give that back to him,” Jesus says. “That is the emperor’s.” But his coin-sized concession opens them to the much larger question: “Then what belongs to God?”

If this were a movie, the scene might begin with the camera in tight, showing the details of the little image of Caesar, the lines on Jesus’s palm beneath it. And then it would begin to zoom out. Soon we can’t make out the coin, and then Jesus’s hand is gone. The huddle of opponents shrink to individual pixels and disappear. The contours of the land smooth out, continents and oceans take shape, and the earth becomes a marbled blue whole and on and on out into our spiraling galaxy and beyond. “Give to God the things that are God’s,” is what he says, as the frame expands toward the infinite, in a universe that is expanding even faster than that. Creation can’t be caught up with, even by our cinematic imagination. And that, all of that, and what’s still coming into being, are the things that are God’s.

The prophet and his challengers and that coin may have long since receded from view, but, miraculously, they are not lost. They have simply taken their place in the order of things, and maybe, if only for a moment, all of them knew exactly where they were. Standing beside this remarkable man, looking at this suddenly insignificant coin, in the midst of God’s astonishing and ongoing act of creation. “YOU ARE HERE,” is one thing this story seems to say.

You see, sometimes it’s not such a bad thing to be put in your place. For many of us, the orbits of our lives have gotten so much smaller over the past months. We feel so much less in control of what we can do and where we can go. Our hurts and our flaws seem to surface more quickly and stand out more starkly on the small stages of our coronavirus lives. It all takes its toll. But grace doesn’t work by giving us greater control over our lives and our world or by making our sins and anxieties and unhelpful habits just go away. No, sometimes grace goes to work on us by locating us. By saying, “You are small, and you are broken, but you are here. In all this beautiful vastness that belongs ultimately only to God, all of who you are is part of all this too.”

Yes, your worries and your failures and your hurts are part of the scene, as surely as those conniving Herodians are. But they’re no bigger than the coin in that Jewish prophet’s hand. A coin to which we can still give over so much of our hearts and minds and time and affection, but wouldn’t have to, if we’d listen to what this Jesus has to say. If we’d let him put us, finally, in our true places.

I suppose this is what we are doing with Julius in his baptism today, right? Putting him, before he knows it, in his small but proper place in a universe that belongs to a loving God. Committing ourselves to be the kind of community that knows our place in the order of things and acts out of a joyful humility to make our little corner of reality truer to its source.

Six hundred years ago a poet wrote that, “All the wickedness in the world that man might do or say was no more to the mercy of God than a live coal dropped in the sea.” Sure. Jesus might have been telling you to make your peace with paying taxes. But who else but Jesus would do so by putting us mercifully in our place. By amazing us and even easing the pain the glowing coals of our sins and failures really can cause, by giving us one nonchalant, but very clear glimpse of the vast and merciful sea in which these little lives of ours are held.