

For those of you familiar with William Shakespeare's work, you will remember that one line from his play *The Tempest* is "Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows." Over time, that line has morphed into the phrase, "Politics makes strange bedfellows." Now, quite honestly, politics making strange bedfellows is by no means a recent development. This has probably happened throughout the history of humanity. And, we find that is **exactly** what is happening in today's gospel reading as the Pharisees and Herodians team up to trick and trap Jesus.

For the past few weeks, we have been journeying with Jesus through the last week of his life, a week that has been intense to say the least. Just a few days before today's confrontation, Jesus had entered Jerusalem where he was greeted by throngs of people shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Then there was that incident where he overthrew the tables of the Temple moneychangers. Jesus has spent the week challenging both the political and religious powers that be. He has been doggedly confronted by the religious leaders who are questioning the authority behind his actions. And, **he** has called into question the **religious leaders'** authority by telling illuminating, confrontational parables. So, today, we

discover the Herodians and the Pharisees team up to trap the itinerant, rabbleroising, peasant rabbi known as Jesus.

To better understand what is happening in this story, we need a little bit of background information. Jews in first century Palestine paid a lot of taxes. There was a temple tax; there were also land taxes, customs taxes, and trade taxes to name just a few more. The tax mentioned in today's reading was yet an additional tax, one particularly despised by the Jews - it was called the Imperial Tax. This tax was required as a tribute to Rome to support the Roman Empire's occupation of Israel. Think of that for a moment - first century Jews were required to pay their oppressors a yearly tax to support their own oppression!

It is also helpful to better understand these two groups of people – the Herodians and the Pharisees. The Herodians, on the one hand, saw themselves as having power derived from Rome. As their name suggests, they were a family political party related to and allied with Herod Antipas, the local puppet ruler supported by the Romans. They were local sympathizers with the Roman rulers and, not surprisingly, the Herodians **supported** paying tax to Caesar because they benefited from it. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were also a political party, as well as religious scholars. They were committed to every detail of Jewish law.

They aligned themselves more closely with the occupied and oppressed and, for **religious** reasons, they **opposed** paying tax to Caesar. Their opposition to paying the Imperial Tax was based **less** on the fact of occupation and **more** on the special coin that had to be used to pay this particular tax. You see, this coin – a denarius, worth a day’s wage – carried the inscription or **likeness** of Tiberius Caesar. And, the **Romans** considered Caesar the **divine** son of Augustus. This inscription or **likeness** was overtly offensive to the religious leaders, and within Jesus’ community the inscription spoke both of oppression and of **blasphemy**. Thus, in Jesus' time, any conversation about the Imperial Tax was very divisive and immediately revealed where one stood in relation to Rome and faith.

Anyway, these two oppositional groups of people, the Herodians and the Pharisees, invoke a temporary truce as they try to trick Jesus, believing they finally have him cornered. They present Jesus with a question that poses a political conundrum, and they await a political response. They ask Jesus, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” By asking this question, they know that if Jesus declares it lawful, he might acquit himself with the Roman authorities, but the crowd of followers would turn against him because it would scandalize the religious establishment. And, if he

rules against it, he positions himself against Rome, a position nobody in their right mind would willingly seek. Brilliantly, Jesus responds by widening the question so that it has little to do with politics. He says, "Show me the coin used for the tax." They quickly bring him a denarius. Then, Jesus asks, "Whose head is this on the coin and whose title?" Thinking they finally have Jesus ensnared, they respond by saying, "The Emperor's."

Now, everyone in attendance knew the commandments and they knew that Jesus had just trapped the trappers in their own blasphemy according to Jewish law. To understand what Jesus has just done, listen to the way David Lose describes what just happened. He writes:

There's more going on here than meets the eye, [because] **along** with that image is an engraved **confession** of Caesar's **divinity**, which means that any Jew [even] **holding** the coin is breaking the first two of the commandments. All of which leads to Jesus' closing line, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's." And with this one sentence, Jesus does not simply evade their trap or confound their plans, he also issues a challenge to his hearers that reverberates through the ages into our sanctuaries.

Now, to even more **clearly** understand this, if we look at verse 20, a better translation of Jesus' question would be, "Whose **likeness** is this, and what title?" And, when the good Jewish religious leaders hear these words, their minds will automatically think back to their Jewish scriptures and the

book of Genesis. They will automatically reference God's pronouncement and promise in Genesis, chapter one, where we read:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our **likeness**;"

Jesus' words are powerful words for the Herodians, the Pharisees and for us. His response calls the Pharisees, the Herodians, and **us** to think about the way in which we are called to live. The key question here is **not** whose image is on the coin but rather whose image is on **us**! Whose image is on our hearts? Jesus is calling **us** to remember **our identity**. You see, what Jesus is really reminding us of is that **we** are made in the image and **likeness** of God. We are **not** gods, but we bear God's **likeness** and we are to act as God acts regarding the way we live in relationship to **all** others and the way we live as good stewards of all we have been given. We are to bear the same characteristics God shows to **us** as we live in relationship to God, to **all** other people and to creation itself. Jesus is saying that we are called to serve as God's **agents** and God's **co-workers**, not as an act of power but rather as an act of **stewardship**, as we work to extend the abundant life God wishes for **all** people and even **all** of creation.

As we go through our daily lives, making decisions and interacting with all kinds of people, it is often easy to forget in whose likeness **we** and **they** are made. God is always calling us back, to turn again to him and

remember that our **primary identity** is to live as God's children, live as God's good stewards of all that we have been given, and **act like the God we see in Jesus!** And, while Caesar or Empire will get many of our coins, each of our **lives** is marked with God's **likeness**, an icon of the One who is its source and destination, as we embody the kingdom of God. While our currency bears the image of Empire, **baptism** is the watermark of our **true** currency, the inspiration for **all** that we do, the choices we make, and for the many ways in which we live as God's stewards of all that we have been given.

The point of this Jesus story is that we are called to live remembering that each one of us has been made in the **likeness** of God. God loves you. God loves you so much that God keeps **your** picture in the divine wallet and on the heavenly refrigerator. Jesus did not care about the tax – his real concern is that you live into the image and **likeness** of the God who lovingly created you. And, that means living in such a way that you love God with all your heart and that you truly love your neighbor, and that means **all others**, as you love yourself and as God loves you! This is the best word we can receive, and it is the best word you can share with others.