

Matthew 22:15-21

Grace to you and peace from God our loving Parent and through Jesus Christ our Savior, amen.

I attended a retreat with the synod this week, where the speaker challenged us to preach more interactively. So this sermon is a product of that challenge.

How many of you, before today, could at least recognize the tagline from today's Gospel reading: Give to Caesar, or render unto Caesar, that which is Caesar's? Keep your hand up if somewhere along the line you were taught what it meant. No worries, I'm not going to call on you or publicly shame you or anything like that.

About 25 years ago, before I had even an inkling of becoming a pastor, I had a single bumpersticker on my soccer-mom station wagon. What the bumpersticker said is not really the point of this story, but to be fully transparent and get this out of the way, it said, "When Jesus said love your enemies he probably meant don't kill them."

One day, I had just pulled into a gas station. A tow truck driver who had been behind me pulled around in front of me, stopped, and started walking back in my direction. When a tow driver wants to talk to me, I pay attention, because it's usually something like, "Your rear passenger wheel bearings are going out, and you should get that looked at." Instead, when I rolled the window down, he was sputtering mad. He jerked his thumb in the direction of my rear bumper and said, "He also said, 'Render unto Caesar.' That means you're supposed to leave things up to the government," walked back to his truck with a metal Christian fish symbol on the back, and drove away.

I've thought about that interaction many times since then. It probably took me a full minute to parse what he'd said, and even then I was confused. It would have been interesting to know more, but one of the things I learned is that bumperstickers are not particularly effective tools for starting conversation. They open the door and shut it at the same moment. It's also when I learned that different traditions read this text from Matthew very differently. The driver's interpretation was 180 degrees away from my

own. But on reflection, I could see which assumptions shaped his view, and which shaped mine.

So: does that mean any text can mean anything? In seminary, we learned to call that wrongheaded belief “eisegesis,” or reading one’s own meaning *into* a text. We believe the Holy Spirit helps us to understand scripture, but we can’t do that in a vacuum, apart from context. The opposite of eisegesis is exegesis, which means *pulling out* the meaning of the text.

Today I want to give you some keys to pulling out the meaning of the text, but first let me confide one of the things I’ve wondered about my tow-truck interaction since then. Would my friend have said the same thing no matter whether the president were George W. Bush or Barack Obama? Would he have read the passage differently if the government were led by a monarch or a military junta or a democratic socialist? I honestly don’t know. Maybe. But I think it behoves us to realize we can’t always map the players in the ancient world to our own epoch, yet at the same time we do need to tease out what Jesus is telling us for today.

So here goes. I’m going to read the Gospel again, slowly, and I’d like you to interrupt me—yes, really, interrupt me—with two kinds of statements. You can say “I wonder” and then tell us what you wonder, and you can say “I notice.”

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this and whose title?” They answered, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

(Opportunity for reflection) So what are some of the most important things you noticed or wondered about?

Who are the Pharisees and who are the Herodians? What does it mean that they're in cahoots here?

What's the nature of the trap? If he says no, the Romans will certainly come after him. If he says yes, he is admitting complicity with an empire that, let's face it, is brutal and unconcerned with folks at the margins.

Do you like paying taxes? In what ways is the Roman tax like or unlike taxation in the U.S. today? Do you think my feelings about my own taxes are a good lens or a bad lens through which to read this passage? Why?

Why do you think Jesus asks the Pharisees' disciples and Herodians for a denarius?

Who is holding the coin? What does it mean that Jesus has to ask for a coin?

"Graven image" = idol Deuteronomy 5:8 "You shall not make for yourself an idol." Tiberias, Divi filius

What things belong to Caesar? What things belong to God?

Why did they go away?

What else have you noticed or wondered about in this text? Where would you look for more information? I don't want you to take my word for it.