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Politics. I'm done with it. Insincerity is everywhere; it feels like politicians want to trap their enemies rather than compromise. They don't listen to understand; instead, they listen to attack and belittle.

Well, I'm here to tell you this is not new. This is the context for today's gospel. You see, the Pharisees and the Herodians were *not* friends. The Pharisees were the scholars and protectors of Jewish law, and they bristled under Roman rule. The Herodians, on the contrary, were complicit with Rome. Herod and his sons were chosen to rule various parts of Palestine. Though Jewish, their allegiance was with Rome. So, when we hear that the Pharisees *and* the Herodians went *together* to see Jesus, we know that something is up. They try to trap Jesus with an unanswerable political question: is it lawful to pay taxes to Rome? The Pharisees really think it isn't, because of Jewish law. There's a Jewish prohibition of graven images like the emperor's face on a coin.¹ But they wouldn't say so, not in public like this, because to do so would be to risk Roman anger. And the Herodians think it *is* lawful to pay taxes to Rome, not the least because that's part of their budget for ruling the area. But *they* wouldn't say so in the middle of a Jewish crowd, because the idea is so unpopular. Remember how Jesus keeps grouping together tax collectors and prostitutes as the lowest of the low? If Jesus says, "it's not lawful to pay taxes to the emperor," in public, with witnesses from Herod, he faces arrest and worse. If Jesus says, "it *is* lawful," he becomes a Roman collaborator, supporting an oppressive, pagan empire.

It's a pretty good trap, as traps go. It's a political ploy. The Pharisees and the Herodians dislike each other but dislike Jesus more. Their question arises not out of real curiosity or a desire to learn but instead from politics, pure and simple.

¹ The New Testament in its Social Environment, 26

So Jesus does something wonderful— he offers a theological response to a political question. Or, more accurately: Jesus offers a savvy political response that just happens to hold a deep theological truth. Jesus was political. Jesus took sides, always against those who oppress, always on the side of the poor and powerless. But what matters to me here, what is hopeful for those of us who see nothing good in the political sphere, is the way Jesus responds theologically to a political trap.

Jesus answers their question with another question: “Whose head is this, and whose title?” Only, that’s not what the question really says. The Greek does not say *head* but εἰκὼν, icon or image. Whose image is this, Jesus asks. Jesus is setting up a theological reply while also deftly avoiding entrapment. The Pharisees and Herodians answer— the Emperor’s image— giving Jesus the opportunity to assert a theological response to living in a political world: give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s. To put it another way, give to the emperor the things bearing the emperor’s image, and give to God the things bearing God’s image.

And what bears God’s image? What is imprinted with God’s εἰκὼν? The word εἰκὼν is a powerful word, a word that takes me back to the first chapter of Genesis, when we hear that God made humans in God’s own image. In the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the word is εἰκὼν. We are made in God’s image. To give to God the things bearing God’s image is to give our selves.

In this context, the question is no longer one of taxes but of ultimate allegiance. Don’t give yourself to Caesar. Don’t give yourself over to the powers of this world. Don’t ever forget that you bear God’s imprint, God’s image. We belong to God, the God who made the world and all that is in it, and who engraved upon us God’s own εἰκὼν. We belong to God, and so the proper response is to spend the rest of our lives giving back to God, rendering from God’s gifts to us our own gifts to God and God’s people.

How do we render ourselves to God? How do we pay back and return to God our very selves? Well, we worship. We join together as Christians and praise the God who made us

and saves us and continues to guide us. We pray for one another, for our community, and for the world. We join together in the sacrament of baptism, we unite with God and one another in the sacrament of Christ's body and blood. But it doesn't stop there: we also give back to God by putting the needs of others ahead of our own wants, as we are called to do.

To make his point, Jesus uses a coin. The coin bears the emperor's image, and it is worth a certain amount. In this case, it's a denarius, worth about one day's wage for the average day laborer at the time. God is worth much more than a denarius. God is of *infinite* worth, worthy of infinite praise and worship, and each and every one of us carry that as bearers of God's εἰκὼν. What would it be like to treat others as if they, too had infinite value? What would it be like to see in each and every person on the street the infinite worth of God?

We are first and foremost citizens of God's kingdom, loyal to the source of all goodness. By virtue of our baptism we promise to honor God and follow Jesus, who always stands on the side of the poor and powerless, who always stands against oppression. Give to the emperor those things that belong to the emperor, and to God those things that belong to God. Follow local and national elections; vote; serve on boards and councils; run for office! But don't ever let politics usurp the place of God. We cannot, *must not* let politics push aside our baptismal vow to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to love our neighbor as ourself, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

Let us be ever mindful of the image we bear, and let us never forget the central call to offer our very soul and life to the source of all life, all goodness, and all mercy. AMEN.