

The Enemy of My Enemy

It's said that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and that's the scene that drops in on us in today's gospel lesson.

Think of the Herodians, the followers of King Herod, as the most liberal of tax and spend Democrats.....

Herod, whom we know famously as the weak chinned glutton who has John the Baptist killed on the whim of his new wife and her shimmering daughter, holds power by the grace of Rome, and he collects taxes and lavishly spends those tax dollars all for the glory of Rome.

These Herodians have nothing in common with the Pharisees, who, like our Tea Party friends, see big government, in this case Rome, as the great oppressor who has the gall to demand taxes paid from the bounty of the land given by God Almighty to the Jewish people — these Pharisees see Herod as nothing more than a renegade and a fake.

No, these two groups have nothing whatsoever in common.

Until now.....

They both find in Jesus a threat to their way of life; a fascinating thing really, because these folks are so far apart on just about everything you can think of, and yet Jesus threatens them both.....

It seems that the presence of God in the midst of humanity threatens all of humanity.

It doesn't matter who we are or what we think or why, the presence of God here, in our midst, is deeply threatening to something basic in humanity.

Maybe it's that need to run the show, that need to be in control, that need to say this is good and that is evil....

The shape those choices take, the ideology that motivates them, the politics behind it all, don't seem to really matter very much.

Instead, it's the insistence on our **right** to make those choices, on our **right to be right**; it is this that seems to put us on a collision course with God...

Insisting on our ways, instead of listening in on God's ways.

And so these old enemies, now new found friends, have come up with a good one; a "gotcha" question that, as the lawyers like to say: "Just answer 'yes' or 'no' sir, just 'yes' or 'no.'"

See, if Jesus says don't pay the tax, that's grounds for immediate arrest and execution as a revolutionary, an enemy of the state; and if he says pay the tax, he'll sound like a Roman lackey.

By golly, these fellows are smart!

Except they forget that Jesus finds himself captured by God, and as God's captive, reality looks entirely different from what we say reality is.

For a long time, many people have taken the famous line "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" as a neat and tidy way to organize their lives.

Give Caesar our public life, and all that goes with it, all the taxes and military service, all of our occupations and protecting the status quo; and give God our private, personal, spiritual life.

What makes that interpretation so attractive is it neatly divides our lives into tightly organized boxes.

More subtly, though, it also keeps God out of most of my day-to-day life, by creating a really big box for my regular life, and a very small box for the God stuff.

But what if Jesus isn't talking about boxes at all?

What if Jesus is reaching down far deeper, what if he's making yet another claim on our entire lives, on the whole of our being, even as we struggle to live those lives in the meat and potato world that so defines our daily existence?

Like when he points out that one cannot serve two masters, because she will love the one and hate the other, so that you and I cannot serve both God and money?

Or when he insists that in order to save our lives, we must lose them?

Or when he cajoles us into remembering that all of our worries about making ends meet and having food on the table and money in the retirement account are a fantastic waste of time and an affront to the God who knows the number of hairs on your head and mine.

Maybe that's why Jesus insists that his challengers say out loud whose image is on that coin.

The coin bears Caesar's image.

Give the coin to the one whose image it bears.

But what of us?

Whose image do we bear?

It's right there in Genesis:

"God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them...."
Gen. 1:27 CEB.

So perhaps what Jesus is saying is something like this:

"That which Caesar has made, give to Caesar; that which God has made, give to God."

Caesar makes coins -- give him back his coins!

God made you -- give yourself, all of yourself, to God!

Which sounds great on a Sunday morning sitting here in the pew, or preaching it from this pulpit.

The rubber, though, meets the road when we leave this place and return to the world of dog-eat-dog competition, of wars and rumors of wars, of Ebola incompetence and ISIS barbarisms and fighting over who gets taxed and why and all of that just plain human messiness.

In that world, this world, how are we to live?

It is, in all reality, a problem that we who profess Jesus as our Lord, face on a daily basis.

And yet the Gospel does not leave us orphans, there is guidance, there is a way.

It's just that its guidance is so very different from what I myself usually come up with.

Blessed are the meek, the gentle, the peacemakers.

If you are forced to walk a mile, walk two.

If anyone begs from you, give.

Love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you.

Don't return violence with violence, but be willing even to die before killing.

All of this, and so much more, is the foolishness of God, foolishness that is true wisdom, and the only real path to life.

God's foolishness, when we live it in the midst of all the messiness that is human life, scrubs off the grit and grime of doing things our way, so that in the scrubbing, the image of God that is imprinted in you, in me, slowly yet certainly, begins to shine from the inside out, transforming even the worst of us into that which we are created to be.

St. Augustine says it beautifully: "Become who you already are."

And as we become in our own lives the image of the living God, perhaps then we shall come to know that which belongs to Caesar, and that which belongs to God.

+amen