

Trapped? – Ben Wayman
October 19, 2014

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

This morning, I will read from a slightly modified translation of the NIV, which I think gets more at the heart of Matthew's meaning. I encourage you to follow along in the version printed in your bulletin.

R: "Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to St Matthew."

C: Glory to you, O Lord.

15 Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. **16** They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are truthful and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you do not regard people with partiality. **17** Tell us then, what you think. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" **18** But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to test me? **19** Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, **20** and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" **21** "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." **22** When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

R: "This is the Gospel of our Lord."

C: Praise to you, O Christ.

Jesus escapes categorization. Wouldn't it be nice to package him up and take him home to meet Mom and Dad? But Jesus refuses to be trapped by us or by the Pharisees or Herodians. Today two Jewish groups, typically at odds, join forces to entrap Jesus. Their hope is that Jesus will take sides. But today Jesus evades their ploys and in so doing, he shows us who we are.

This morning our gospel lesson teaches us that we are the ones trapped, not Jesus. Like the Pharisees and Herodians, we have mistakenly thought that resistance or accommodation are our only options for responding to life's challenges. But today Jesus shows us an alternative.

Today Jesus shows us that the two options represented by the Pharisees and the Herodians are actually two sides of the same idolatrous coin. A response in either direction would have made Jesus an idolater. But to see this, we need some historical background for our passage.

When the Pharisees' disciples and the Herodians ask Jesus whether it is 'lawful to pay taxes to the emperor', they are posing a question meant to implicate Jesus regardless his

answer. If Jesus says ‘Yes’, he sides against the Pharisees and undermines his authority as prophet and teacher. If he says ‘No,’ he sides against the Herodians and is guilty of treason. The question is a trap. It’s like the question, “Have you stopped beating your wife?” The question is loaded.

Even more, the question is controversial. The imperial tax was an extremely divisive ‘census’ tax that was instituted when Judea became a Roman province. This tax would eventually trigger the revolt of the Zealots that resulted in the destruction of the Temple; the very Temple in which Jesus is standing in our story today. So the trap set for Jesus was loaded and controversial.

And there’s more. Not only was this tax controversial among the Jewish groups of Jesus’ day, it was theologically charged. This tax had to be paid to Rome with *Roman* coinage. And this coin, as Jesus shows us, contains the image and inscription that many Jews considered blasphemous. It read: ‘Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest’. (NIB, 420) Some Jewish groups in Jesus’ day not only refused to pay the tax, but they refused to carry the coin.

That Jesus had to ask for the coin suggests that he and his disciples were among those who did not carry the coin. It is therefore extremely important that the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians were the ones to produce the coin: the coin bearing the image of a man with an inscription claiming his divinity. Jesus’ response draws attention to the second commandment: ‘You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them’ (Exod. 20:4-5). In so doing, Jesus alerts the Pharisees and Herodians to the reality that *they* are the ones trapped. Their “very possession of the coin makes them idolaters.” (Hauerwas, *Matthew*, 190). And they didn’t even know it.

All this time, the Pharisees and Herodians had been working with a false alternative. Jesus rejects the premise of their loaded question and exposes both the Pharisees and Herodians to be trapped in idolatry. And they are amazed.

I wonder if you have ever been trapped. I wonder if you have ever been trapped while trying to trap someone else. This happened to me a few years ago in a very poor parenting move. One of my children, it seemed to me, was lying. After hours of interrogation, with no sign of fatigue from my son, I employed a tactic. Matthew would call it a trap. I said, “Fine, then, I will have to check the video.” I then proceeded to concoct an elaborate story of hidden videos that cover every square foot of our home and track every movement. In my attempt to expose the lie of my son, I exposed myself as a liar. This is how idolatry works. I confessed to my son yesterday about this. Thank God for the gift of preaching!

Repentance is the antidote to idolatry. But to repent, we need to identify the ways in which we are so trapped. Let’s return to the Pharisees and Herodians to see how Jesus exposed their idolatry.

This is the only place in Matthew's gospel in which the Herodians appear. The Herodians were a group of Jews who supported the imperial tax because they supported Roman rule. Their livelihood depended on the success of Rome and so they supported Herod, the puppet king of Caesar. They decided that making friends with Caesar was the best way to protect themselves from his violence and oppression. It's kind of like being friends with the school bully; you become a jerk, but at least you don't get beat up anymore. The Herodians represent the accommodationist option and they were wildly unpopular during Jesus' time.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were the 'cool kids' in Jesus' day. They were reformers and purists. They resented and resisted Rome and its pork-eating pagans. The Pharisees insisted covenant holiness was for *all* God's people—not just priests or those associated with the temple. And the way that this holiness and reform played itself out was in resistance to Rome.

But even though we may be inclined to side with the Pharisees and their resistance, Jesus points out again and again throughout Matthew's gospel that they are not to be imitated. They are hypocrites. They say the right things but do not do what they teach. And today, Jesus shows us that they, along with the Herodians, are idolaters.

In their strange alliance with the Herodians, the Pharisees have once again located themselves outside the kingdom of heaven. This shouldn't come as a surprise to us. We have seen this throughout Matthew's gospel; most recently in his parables of the two sons, the wicked tenants, and last week, the parable of the wedding banquet. But today Jesus points out that the Pharisees' resistance to Rome is not only a rejection of the kingdom of heaven, it's idolatry. And they are amazed, and so was Matthew's audience 50 years later, and so should we be.

That we are not amazed that both accommodation and resistance are two sides of the same coin shows us that *we* are trapped, just like the Pharisees and Herodians. And we didn't even know it.

Today Jesus offers to set us free. Jesus' response to the Pharisees and Herodians exposes them and us as idolaters. We are trapped between the idols of resistance and accommodation. We have traded our worship of God for a politic that does not need God to make sense. The way of living that Jesus gives us, the politic of the kingdom of heaven, is described in the Sermon on the Mount.

Now, the Sermon on the Mount only makes sense if the kingdom of heaven is true. Why else would anyone respond to violence, injustice, and oppression with *non*-resistance, generosity, and love? Such a response only makes sense if the kingdom of heaven is true and if Jesus is truly God.

Jesus sets us free from the lie that Caesar is god, and that his kingdom is all there is. Jesus reminds us, as Paul reminded the Christians in Thessalonica, that we "have turned to God

from idols” (1 Thess. 1.9). The challenge for us, though, is to identify those idols—both obvious and subtle—that entrap us and hold us in their grip.

Every morning at Morning Prayer, we say the Apostles’ Creed. And every time Mathias Zahniser says the Apostles’ Creed, he places his right hand over his chest—the very gesture we Americans have been taught to use when pledging our allegiance to America. In so doing, Mathias shows us the way in which worship demonstrates our true allegiance.

What we worship, what we pledge our allegiance to and are willing to die for, reveals whether we are entrapped by idols or embraced by God. Paul encourages the Thessalonians and us to recover our worship of the “living and true God” (1 Thess. 1.9). In worship, we declare that God and Caesar are not equals. Thus there is no excuse for a ‘divided loyalty’ between God and any other ‘caesar’ in our lives.

Such caesars take many forms, taking their taxes and fees in many ways. Some caesars come in the form of job security or club sports or national loyalty. Others come in the guise of religious commitment or family care or social action. These caesars become our idols often without our knowing it. One way to expose these idols in our lives, Jesus teaches us today, is to ask the question: whose image does this bear? Any image other than that of the God revealed in Jesus will not do.

Just as Jesus teaches the Pharisees and Herodians to ‘give back’ the coin to the Emperor, so are we challenged to ‘give back’ our idols to our bosses, our coaches, our spouses, and our communities. This is repentance. And through repentance we are set free from the grips of the many caesars. And in so doing, we return our very selves to the living God whose kingdom has come in Jesus.