Sermon for the Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost: Matthew 22:15-22
The Rev. Brooks Cato

That Gospel Reading is one of those Bible stories I wish came with stage directions. I wish we got more details, but we don't. But because we don't, we've got some space to imagine. So, religious and political factions join forces to trick Jesus with a gotcha question about taxes -- I'm not imagining that part -- but they don't ask to understand God's role in their lives. They ask out of malice. They want him to stumble, want him to say the wrong thing, want him to provide enough justification to finally get rid of this troublesome prophet. But Jesus is wily and knows better than to get tricked by gotcha questions. And he answers with just enough brilliant ambiguity to avoid the trap and send 'em packing. I imagine Jesus takes that coin with Caesar's face on it, turns it over in his hand, and tosses it back to them, showing how little it's actually worth. "Who's face is this? Caesar's? Oh, well then. Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar."

Nevermind what it could purchase, that coin has no more inherent value than the metals it's made out of. And what's true for that coin is true for Caesar. Caesar's not inherently powerful; he's just a person in no way better than any other. Same goes for the empire -- it's not inherently valuable or right or trustworthy. Same goes for the legal system -- not inherently just! The coin, the emperor, the empire, the legal system undergirding the empire -- they're all human constructions. They don't matter intrinsically. They matter because we say they matter. And while it could sound like Jesus says "pay your taxes" as an endorsement of the empire, its laws, and the man sitting at its head, Jesus knows about inherent worth. He's not endorsing much of anything. Is it lawful to pay taxes? Well, the empire makes its own laws, and their laws say so, so yes, it is lawful. But are those laws good? This he does not answer. He simply says, because it is lawful to pay taxes to the empire with a picture of the emperor on the currency, give the emperor the coins with his own face on 'em. They belong to him.

There's something left unsaid here that carries a lot of weight, and I imagine it's the unsaid that scares the Pharisees and Herodians off. The unsaid showed that these folks were wrong for two real big reasons. They were wrong for trying to trip up Jesus, and they were just as wrong for confusing the emperor with God. They asked if it was lawful to pay taxes. Yes. But remember, the empire wrote those laws and the currency has the emperor's face on it, so the taxes are rightfully his. All that's true, but the undertone is that the framework of the empire is itself neither inherently good nor inherently valuable. God is, the Kingdom of God is, God's message is, but the empire and its trappings are not. They might as well ask if it's okay to use chaff for firestarter. That's about all it's good for. Everything about the empire's power exists simply because the empire said it should. They're only in power because they're strong enough to take it and insist it's right that they have it. Their system was built on all that made up worth. Inherent value isn't in their calculus. What Jesus is getting at is that it's just fine to give something with made up value to someone with made up authority.

The premise of the tax question was supposed to snag Jesus in a God vs. Emperor trap, but he played along using their made up values. Sure, go ahead and render that made up currency to the made up powers that be. But he communicated that with an unsaid inversion. In the world of God's people, God stands in place of emperor, the Kingdom of Heaven in place of empire, and Jesus himself is stamped on currency where the currency of Christ is justice, mercy, grace, and love. That currency does have inherent value. And that currency bolsters lives of faith lived for what is real, what is true, and what is kind. Jesus says the right thing, the empire-approved thing while getting the message across that he looks on the empire's structures that will one day end his life with disdain, and as good people of faith, the Pharisees and Herodians should share his sentiment. But rather than cling to the God before them, they flee to the security of empire's false idols.

Now, I know the laws of empire, the power of empire, the currency of empire, and emperors themselves do matter. They affect real life and wield real power. Your grocery receipt, the newest story about ICE hunting

humans, the terror a tweet from a single man engenders around the globe -- these things do matter. They affect our lives unevenly and favor some in place of others because of a social contract that agrees little pieces of paper're money, little men in suits're leaders, and little transgressions of the law're acceptable as long as it's the right people transgressing. None of that is as things should be. But it is as things are. And, to butcher a line from Bertolt Brecht, "because things are the way they are, things cannot remain the way they are." Humanity's built countless systems that've succeeded and countless that've failed with socially fabricated value as foundation stones. And when people begin to question their inherent value, it doesn't just threaten a loss of that fabricated value, it threatens the collapse of entire systems. Confidence in how well governments work, the strength of economic systems, the power leaders wield wanes. And if it wanes enough, the tattered remains of the country crumble, and regular people face the harsh consequences of putting faith in Caesar where it should've been in God. If I'm reading the subtext right here, that's what scared the Pharisees and the Herodians off. Not that they'd been bested (though they had) but that their understanding of the world was brought so thoroughly into question as to show how tenuous a system of misplaced faith really is. And all that with the simple flip of a coin.

I don't know which systems are better. I don't know if it's better to go along with the imagined and the agreed upon. I don't know how to serve the reality of God's Kingdom using the fabricated values of empire. I'm not even sure I know what's inherently valuable. Like diamonds, are diamonds actually valuable? Are they valuable enough to justify blood spilled, or is it the blood that makes them more valuable than cubic zirconia? Because just about the only thing of value in God's Kingdom I can make sense of is the value of life. And not just human life, either. Creation itself has inherent value. That which supports life and makes gentle, sufficient use of resources, that's valuable. A currency of kindness is valuable. A currency that keeps God as our north star, that's valuable. But that which looks on created things with disgust, claims to hold more value than a human life, claims a lawfulness that shifts with human ambition, that's misplaced at best and damned dangerous at worst.

They ask if it's lawful to pay a heap of taxes. Jesus tells 'em to take that damnedly dangerous heap and drop it where it belongs, right at Caesar's feet. Because while the Glory of Caesar's measured by the height of that heap, the currency of God, the glory of God remains the human person fully alive.