

by Arthur E. Zannoni

**D**ig into your pockets, purse, or wallet. Find some coins or bills, and place them on a table around an open bible. Light a candle. The money reflects Sunday's gospel theme—a call to reflect on paying taxes, on what belongs to the government and what to God.

**LEADER:** Gracious God, help us realize that you are present in all spheres of our lives. Help us integrate the circles in which we live.

**ALL:** Help us to speak civilly to one another, respecting our differences and embracing the insights we each bring to our conversations.

**R**ecently, the street in front of my home needed repair. The repairs included new natural gas lines, new storm sewers, new subterranean electrical lines, new curbing and pavement. Publicly I was all for these improvements. It had been 50 years since the city installed these utilities or built up the street. I made this need known to the neighbors. At the very same time, while not voicing it to others, I was against the improvements because they meant new tax assessments for me.

Later I talked with my daughter, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. "Dad, you are experiencing cognitive

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dissonance," she said. After some conversation together, I found out that, simply put, cognitive dissonance means that people are capable of holding together incompatible and contradictory beliefs and actions. For example, parents may teach their kids not to lie but lie themselves. Or, an American citizen displays the flag on every national holiday, yet never takes time to vote on Election Day and gripes about paying taxes.

We are all capable of divided hearts, as I was about the improvements to our street. Whether we are rich or poor, we may want services and goods, but that doesn't mean we want to pay for them or can pay.

Dissonant attitudes abound in our culture and can support the splits within us. One attitude

maintains that I should get as much as I can for me and mine. Another attitude resolves to give as little as possible to the government and what is left over to God. Another attitude happily pays a reasonable share of taxes for police and firefighters, schools and roads, and health care.

In Sunday's gospel, Jesus doesn't question using taxes as a means to meet the needs of all. This is not a popular notion today when the highest political value is not the common good but a tax break.

● What issues in your neighborhood leave you feeling conflicted?

● What issues tend to make you stop listening?



# GOSPEL

## Jesus answers a question with a question.



**NARRATOR:** The Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech. They sent their disciples to him with the Herodians, saying:

**PHARISEE 1:** Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You are not concerned with anyone's opinion, for you do not regard a person's status.

**PHARISEE 2:** Tell us, then, what is your opinion, is it lawful to pay

the census tax to Caesar or not?

**JESUS:** Why are you testing me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin that pays the census tax.

**NARRATOR:** They handed him the Roman coin.

**JESUS:** Whose image is this and whose inscription?

**PHARISEES:** Caesar's.

**JESUS:** Then give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.

Matthew 22.15-21

## Jesus calls us to image God in our lives.

Entrapment is as old as the bible. In Sunday's gospel two religious groups—Pharisees and Herodians—partner to entrap Jesus. They deliberately set Jesus up when they approach him with the question, “Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?”

Either a no or a yes answer will get Jesus in trouble. If Jesus says no, they have grounds to accuse him of sedition before the Roman Procurator. A yes answer will make Jesus unpopular with the people who find the Roman tax quite burdensome.

Jesus dismisses their flattery and in typical rabbinic fashion

responds to their question with a question. He asks whose image the coin for paying the tax carries. When his questioners identify the image as Caesar's, Jesus evades their trap and responds, “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

Jesus' saying uses the Greek word *apodidomi*, meaning *to repay* or *give back*. This word gives Jesus' saying a special nuance. Jesus is talking about the just reimbursement of someone who has a legitimate claim on us. The saying evenly balances two legitimate claims—God and government. Jesus' challenge to repay or give back suggests that one can indeed be loyal both to

a religious tradition and to a secular power.

- What legitimate claims on you have you worked hard to repay?
- What of immeasurable value do you work to pay forward?

Jesus' answer to his entrapment is more than clever. Taking into account the original cultural context underscores how perceptively Jesus reads the confrontation. When his questioners promptly produce the coin Jesus asks to see, he immediately exposes their hypocrisy.

Any Jew of Jesus' day who was observant of the Mosaic Law would not carry a coin minted with the image of the emperor on it. These coins picture the emperor as divine. The second of the ten commandments forbids making or worshiping idols. Anyone carrying the Roman coin with its “graven image” has already settled the issue of relating to the Roman Empire and its taxation.

The Pharisees raise a question still with us. To what degree do we accommodate religion to culture? The Pharisees encouraged and practiced keeping the Law of Moses strictly, both as a way of being distinct from foreign occupation and at the same time surviving as a faith community in the midst of its cultural influences.

- What, if any, American values seem unchristian to you?
- How do you respond to Pope Francis, who strongly critiques

an “economy of exclusion” that defies the free market (*Joy of the Gospel* #53)?

**M**aking the Pharisees into the “bad guys” of the gospel can foster anti-Semitic stereotyping of Jewish people today. Jesus did not abolish the law and the prophets or everything the Pharisees taught. The first Christians were Jews who kept the Law of Moses along with Jesus’ interpretation of it and his own unique teachings.

Like the Pharisees Jesus was a practicing Jew and a reformer of his Jewish religion. As a matter of fact, many of Jesus’ teachings are derived from the Pharisees. The Pharisees addressed God as Father, so did Jesus. Their teachers were called Rabbi, so was Jesus. They believed in the resurrection, so did Jesus. They both taught the common people and functioned in synagogues.

Both the Pharisees and Jesus taught how important the good deed was (Hebrew *mitzvah*) and encouraged their followers to practice such deeds. The Pharisees were not all hypocrites. The gospel tells stories about just and devout Pharisees such as those who warned Jesus of the risks he was taking (Luke 13.31) and Nicodemus who dialogues with Jesus (John 3.1-21).

● **What stereotypes do you regularly resist?**



**T**he question of whose image the coin carries contains an allusion easy to miss. Jews of Jesus’ time knew from the book of Genesis who carries the image and likeness of God. “So God created humankind in God’s image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them” (Genesis 1.27).

Jesus’ response to the Pharisees and Herodians is more than a clever dodge. Jesus confronts a worldview about who images God—Caesar or the human person. Jesus insists we cannot keep separate our obligations to God and those to government. God blesses and calls us to integrate the spheres of our lives and image the One who made us.

The image they bear and project must concern Christians even more than movie stars and athletes. These celebrities worry how they look, the make-up they wear or the muscles they have developed,

their ability to act and appear on the movie screen or playing field. Being made to God’s image and likeness calls the Christian to act as God acts with compassion and forgiveness toward everyone.

Christians image God by helping the poor, caring for the abused and sick, visiting the imprisoned, feeding the hungry, grieving with those who mourn, and listening attentively to those who ache. We give to God our very selves through our goodness to others.

We carry the image of God into the civil sphere of government. Our advocacy for just and compassionate government policies toward the poor, toward health care, education, and immigration are examples of how we image God in the public square.

The conflicts and dissent we have with the civil rule also show God’s image in us. Conscientious objection images a God of peace. Christians who oppose the torture of prisoners and capital punishment reveal a God of compassion. Believers who protest the abuse of the environment reveal a respect for the Creator of all that lives.

The conflicts of our lives challenge us to ask: who do I serve? How we image God will reveal our answer.

● **How do you see God imaged in you?**

● **How do you see God imaged in others, including politicians?**



## Cyrus serves God.

Several artifacts from the Ancient Near Eastern world depict a ceremony wherein a god reaches out to one who would be king. The act of grasping his hand was seen as conferral of royal authority. This human king then ruled in place of the god.

In Sunday's reading from Second Isaiah, Israel's God confers power and authority on Cyrus the Persian king. Cyrus subdues nations and releases captive kings so that they might serve him unfettered. He throws open doors and barred gates in a spirit of freedom. The Israelites who have been captive in Babylon benefit from Cyrus's enlightened policies.

In the Old Testament, Cyrus' edict is found in Ezra 1.2-4. The edict was his "Emancipation Proclamation" to the Jews in exile in Babylon. In addition to returning the Jews to their homeland, Cyrus returned the sacred vessels the Babylonians had looted from the Jerusalem Temple before they destroyed it in 587 B.C. He also sent money to help the Jews rebuild their Temple and the destroyed city of Jerusalem.

The first reading from Second Isaiah provides a powerful background for meditating on this Sunday's gospel. The voice of God refers to a foreign head of empire, Cyrus the Great, as the head of empire, Cyrus the Great, as the "anointed one" (the Hebrew word is *messiah*).

This pagan emperor of the Persians earns this title because he

unknowingly has become God's instrument in the restoration of the exiled Jews to their homeland. In exile the prophet experiences God as Creator of all.

### God calls Cyrus his anointed one.

**Thus says God to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose hand I grasp, subduing nations before him and making kings run in his service, opening doors before him—and leaving the gates unbarred.**

**For the sake of my servant Jacob, of Israel, my chosen one, I have called you by your name, giving you a title though you do not know me. I am the Holy One, and there is no other; besides me there is no god.**

**I arm you though you do not know me, so that from the rising to the setting of the sun people may know there is no one besides me. I am the Holy One; there is no other.**

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6

- When have you experienced the awesomeness of God that Isaiah describes?
- How do you see God working in and through the many new immigrants from different nations who practice different religions?

### Faith Sharing Tip

## What about people who don't share?

Perhaps they have had hurtful group experiences and have not yet come to trust the community. Maybe they express themselves better artistically or in action. Maybe they are new to

spirituality and unfamiliar with the Spirit's activity in their lives. Perhaps trust and awareness will come. Invite quiet group members to share as a way of valuing their input.

## PRAY

**LEADER:** God we ask you to help us to be constantly aware of your presence in all people.

**ALL:** Give God glory and honor.

**LEADER:** God help us to realize that you are the creator of all and the source of all justice.

**ALL:** Give God glory and honor.

**LEADER:** God, you challenge us to be responsible believers and citizens at all times. Be with us as we prepare to elect representatives and senators for the 114th Congress.

**ALL:** Give God glory and honor.

*Exchange a sign of peace and blessing with one another*

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