

Matthew 22:15-22 Who's Bigger? Rev Kevin Arensman October 15, 2017

A man suffered a serious heart attack and had open heart bypass surgery. He woke up from the surgery to find himself in the care of nuns at a Catholic Hospital. As he was recovering, a nun asked him questions regarding how he was going to pay for his treatment. "Do you have health insurance?"

"No," the man croaked. "No health insurance." "Do you have any money in the bank?" "No money in the bank." "Do you have a relative who could help you?" asked the nun. "I only have a spinster sister. She is a nun." The nun bristled. "Nuns are not spinsters! Nuns are married to God." "Alright, already!" croaked the patient. "Send the bill to my brother-in-law." Now, I mean no disrespect to our Catholic brothers and sisters. But, this story does point out that it's good to be connected; to have someone you can depend on. But, more importantly, it's good to be able to name that person you ultimately depend on.

You see, the people you depend upon in life are the people who are able to exercise authority over your life. Since you depend on them, they have the authority to offer, or to withhold, whatever it is you depend on from them. Your parents exercise authority over you, your spouse, your boss, your teacher or principal. How about the utility companies, the city, the state or the nation? You depend on each of them and thus they hold some authority over you. They can give what you depend on, or they can withhold it. Or they can demand something of you in return for what you depend on; like taxes, huh?

We're starting to hear a lot about taxes nowadays, again. It seems that all of these civil authorities want a piece of us, and we all want that piece to be as small as possible. But, we do want the benefits that we depend on! The question, of course, is who should pay what; what is everyone's fair share; and who should decide that? Isn't it great to know that the same challenges were faced two thousand years ago, in Jesus' day? Maybe it's not so great, since no one seems to have figured it out yet.

So, Jesus is back in the Temple where he has been arguing with the Jewish leaders about authority; who has authority over us, and who does not? It has not been a nice argument. In today's scripture the argument takes a nasty turn. The Pharisees were the strict orthodox followers of Moses and keepers of the Jewish way of life. The Herodians were their enemies who sold out to the Roman occupiers. Their goal was peace and prosperity by aligning themselves with Rome, even if they must compromise their religious beliefs. The Pharisees would never enlist the Herodian's help unless they had a greater threat, and that greater threat was Jesus, who kept challenging the authority of the Pharisees and the other religious leaders. The Pharisees and Herodians would never get cozy unless they had a chance to stick it to Jesus good.

Of course, they cozied up to Jesus, nice as can be: "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are." They were laying it on thick because there was a crowd watching. They had to look like the good guys. "Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" It sounded like a legitimate question. The argument was going on all over Jerusalem; and, in fact, all over the Roman Empire. And the Pharisees and Herodians strongly disagreed with each other on this issue. But, they wanted to catch Jesus in their trap.

If Jesus answered, 'sure, pay taxes to the emperor,' then the people suffering under Roman oppression would turn against him. If Jesus answered, 'no, don't pay taxes to the emperor,' then he would be subject to arrest and severe punishment by the Romans; and the Herodians would quickly tell their Roman friends.

'But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "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." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.'

Now many people have misunderstood Jesus' point, thinking that there should be a separation between church and state, between faith and politics. But, we know, especially in America, that there is never a clear distinction. Many people try, but their faith always encroaches upon their politics, and their politics almost always encroach upon their faith. Can any of you completely separate the two? I can't.

But, if Jesus is not talking about separation between faith and politics, church and state; what is he talking about? Authority. Who or what is the biggest authority in your life? Jesus acknowledges that we have competing authorities in this life: "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." And what are the things that belong to the emperor? Well, all of Israel, at that time; every person, every parcel of

land, every building, everything that happened was under the authority of Rome. And that meant that Rome could tax everything that moved or breathed, and they did. Interesting, though, Rome allowed the Jewish leaders to also tax the people, especially for use of the Temple; as long as they got theirs.

How does that translate today, where the tax argument is being raised again: Who should pay what? What is fair? Should the rich pay a higher rate than the poor? “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” What belongs to the United States? What belongs to Pennsylvania? Unless you dispute your citizenship, and also the benefits you receive, then you owe something back. And if we would just look outside our borders and notice what great benefits we continue to receive in America, compared to the rest of the world; we ought to feel glad that we can pay our share in strengthening our state and our nation so that others can continue to receive those benefits. Okay, my bias would be that those who benefit the most should pay more. I believe that would be fair and just. But, it’s a complicated situation; especially when the greatest goal for most Americans continues to be to simply accumulate more wealth.

Remember, now, the rest of Jesus’ answer, “and to God what is God’s.” How does that translate today? What belongs to God? In particular, what authority belongs to God, since that was the larger conversation in the Temple that day? Remember that Jesus asked for a coin that would be used to pay the tax. The Jewish leaders brought Jesus a denarius, a Roman coin. Then Jesus asked whose image was on the coin, whose inscription? Of course, the image was that of Caesar, the Roman Emperor; and the inscription said, “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, great high priest,” which claimed that Caesar was divine, a god to be worshiped and obeyed. It sounds like they had a bit of trouble with church and state issues too. But Jesus didn’t question that. When Jesus asked whose image was on the coin, he was thinking of someone else’s image, which also indicated authority and dependence. The Jewish leaders would never forget the story of creation. They could all quote Genesis: ‘Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness....So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’ (Genesis 1:26-27)

As Jesus referred to the coin, he referred to Caesar’s authority, and also the Jewish dependence upon the Roman Empire. The coin ultimately belonged to Caesar. Jesus did not dispute this authority, or the need for government. But when he said give to God what is God’s, he was referring to another image, the image of God that the Bible tells us is stamped upon every human being. The Jews believed that God’s image was stamped upon everything created by God. Clearly then, humans, and all creation, belong to God. Caesar still does have authority, but whose image is also upon Caesar, and the President and every person of power or wealth in this world? As co-creators with God, is there anything we create, even money, possessions, power, fame, anything in all creation (whether we deny it or not), that is not stamped with God’s image? Some people ought to be embarrassed about that.

Caesar was the biggest power that anyone could think of in those days. We feel pretty powerless and at the mercy of a number of powers in our world today. But who is the biggest power in this world, the biggest authority? Who do we ultimately depend on the most? You have to answer that for yourself, because that is your god; little “g.” Whose image do you carry in this life; money, power, sex, fame, the Philadelphia Eagles, yourself, your family, America, the flag, even the church or liberty and justice for all? If you give more time and attention, and depend more for your happiness and well-being, upon any of these, then that is the image you carry; that is the image you portray to the world; that is your god.

The coin belongs to Caesar, the biggest known authority in that time. Who do you belong to? Who is your biggest authority today? Whose image do you bear? Whose image will you serve?