

“To Entangle Him in His Talk”

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Texts: Matthew 22:15-22 and Isaiah 45:1-17

“Then the Pharisees went and took counsel how to entangle him in his talk.” A newer translation puts it even more plainly: “The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.”

Jesus was a preacher. His words were a source of comfort, providing hope and even healing to many, to those who were ready and willing to receive his teaching, those who had “ears to hear,” a phrase that recurs in the scriptures. In the early years of my ministry, now long ago, I was involved in a discussion about the source of there preacher’s authority to preach, and an older colleague, whom I greatly respected and admired, said that the primary source of a minister’s authority to preach was the people’s willingness to listen. That seemed somehow unsatisfying to me. Could it be as simple as that? And couldn’t there be something more, well, reliable? Preferably something over which I had some control.

But over many years of preaching I have come to appreciate the wisdom of what he said. Because however elegantly and eloquently one might speak, however heartfelt one’s expression, however well-reasoned in argument, however well-supported by example and application, however careful one’s choice of words, without the listener’s openness and willingness to receive what one is struggling to say, communication is simply impossible. In his justly renowned Divinity School Address to the graduating class at Cambridge in 1848, Ralph Waldo Emerson offered an encouraging word to those future preachers by noting that he would be blessed by having at least some listeners with, as he said, a good ear, such that in Emerson’s words, “a sermon though foolishly spoken may be wisely heard.” As I have said before, I not only believe that, I depend on it.

Today’s lesson is one of a sequence of episodes in which Jesus’ opponents are attending to his words only to use them against him, listening not to understand or appreciate, let alone to receive, but “to entangle him in his talk,” “to entrap him in what he said.” It is possible not only to speak, but also to listen with malicious intent. This is going on every day just now in this election year, indeed every hour, when on both sides political rivals are constantly listening to each other just that way, seeking to entrap each other by turning what he or she said back on them while trying to get the right “spin” on their own remarks. Partisanship tends to influence one’s perspective on this, such that we are more likely to perceive more malicious intent in the opposition camp than in one’s own, but the attempt to entrap goes both ways.

I got to thinking how spiritually depleting it must have been for Jesus to have to engage in these verbal jousts with those he knew were out to get him, attempting to provoke him into saying something that can be used against him. How poignant that a man striving only to do God’s will, whose “holy work was doing good” should provoke such enmity. And they were cunning enemies, these Pharisees. You could miss it in a single reading – I did – that in this instance they don’t even approach him themselves; rather, they send their own disciples as their agents to do their dirty work for them. So they come to him, dripping with false piety: “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God truthfully, and show deference to no one; for you

do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not.”

On the surface, at least, this sounds like a straightforward inquiry, not dissimilar to the kind of questions addressed to Randy Cohen, who writes “The Ethicist” column in the *New York Times Magazine*, or, for that matter, to Dear Abby: Dear Jesus, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” But Jesus is not an advice columnist.

And, here, is not meek or mild, either. He confronts them, very bluntly, with the truth about themselves, signaling that he is not fooled by their pretensions: “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?” Strong words.

Take out a coin, he says, “Whose picture is on it?” Caesar’s, of course. Well then, he says, as if it were obvious, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” The text says that when they heard his reply, they marveled — another translation says they were amazed — and went away.

But if they went away marveling, it was not so much because they were amazed by his response to their question, but rather because he had managed to evade the trap they had intended to set for him in asking it. “Is paying the tax lawful or not?” they had asked, “Yes or no?” But if he answered no, they would have grounds to report him to the Roman officials and have him arrested for sedition. And if he answered yes, he would be discredited in the eyes of many of the people, who resented taxation not only for the reasons most of us do but also saw it as violation of Jewish law, which forbade paying tribute to any other King than God.

So as they walked away, at least some of them must have been muttering, “He didn’t answer the question.” “So what is it? Should we pay taxes or not?” “What is Caesar’s and what is God’s?” His response raised more questions than answers, as Jesus often did. I was reminded of a friend of mine who once asked a Rabbi, “Why does a Jew always answer a question with a question?” The Rabbi replied, “So what’s wrong with a question?”

But maybe this uncertainty is just what Jesus intends. When it comes to the question of what belongs to Caesar — to the state, to the secular, the worldly — and what belongs to God — to the things of the spirit — we never can be too sure. Or maybe he is throwing it back on us, saying that this is a question we each have to work out for ourselves under the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves at any given time. He offers a general principle and leaves the application up to us. So maybe he is suggesting that this is a permanent and ongoing issue, a question that we cannot answer once and for all but must each, individually and continually, confront. What is Caesar’s, what is God’s, and what do we owe to each?

The commentator William Barclay casts the issue in terms of dual citizenship. Christians are citizens of the country where they happen to live and derive benefits thereby, public service, public safety, social welfare and so on “But,” Barclay writes, “the Christian is also a citizen of heaven....It may well be that the two citizenships will never clash; they do not need to. But when the Christian is convinced...that something is against the will of God, he must resist it and take no part in it. Where the boundaries between the two duties lie, Jesus does not say. That is

for [each individual's] conscience to test.” But his main point is that we are called to fulfill our duties as good citizens of the state as well as of God's kingdom, that we have earthly and provisional duties as well as heavenly and eternal obligations.

I don't disagree with that, but I understand what Jesus is saying in a more expansive sense: that as Christians — as religious people — we live in two realms, we belong to two orders of reality — the ultimate and the immediate, the spiritual and the material. And existentially we cannot separate the two; we cannot live in one and not the other, because these two realities interpenetrate. They are part of one another. God moves within history as well as beyond it, is immanent as well as transcendent, and we have the intuition at least that our finite lives are part of the infinite. Everything is connected. We cannot, as someone has said, kill time without wounding eternity.

The ultimate of course is just that. And ultimately, all things belong to God, as today's Psalm proclaims: “The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.” God is the ground of our being and all being, the source from which all our blessings flow, even our very lives, and ultimately, inescapably, we will in time render all that we have and all that we are to God. But it follows from this understanding that what we render to Caesar is actually a part of what we render to God. Symbolically, this means that the way we live day to day in the realm of the immediate matters — the decisions we make, even the small ones, the quality of our relationships with one another, the shape of the communities we build together — all of what we call our ordinary life — all of it matters.

The large majority of Jesus' parables, and much else of his teaching, concerns wealth and money. That actually shouldn't be surprising, if we consider that money both symbolically and actually money is a measure of value. Your checkbook is a pretty accurate measure of what you value more and what you value less. In a suggestive way our calendars and date books may be revelatory in the same way, a measure of our priorities, measured not by what we say but what we do. How we spend our time and money suggests what we value most. And in a very real sense our values describe who we are. “By their fruits you will know them,” Jesus said.

We are living in anxious times financially right now. It is a time of high anxiety throughout the world. For more than a few — people facing lay-offs, the loss of their homes and other dire consequences of credit crisis — it is a time of desperation, but for almost all of us, a time of anxiety. Now Jesus didn't know anything about sub-prime lending, or stock options, or even mutual funds. Our world would be as unimaginable to him as his is to us. What Jesus did know about is something that has not changed in all those years, which is human nature. So even though he spoke in a cultural situation and lived in a social setting so different from ours, his words can still speak to our situation today. In times of crisis, times of panic, we tend to get confused and lose our bearings. We forget our priorities, which are about keeping our values in order. For more than twenty years, I had a bulletin board beside my desk with a motto I first saw on the refrigerator of a parishioner that read, “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” A reminder about priorities, about keeping first things first.

In his most famous sermon Jesus said:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.”

And he goes on to say, “do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on...But seek first [God’s] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be yours as well.”

And when he says to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s, it is, in part, a reminder of the same thing: not to be so anxious about the things of this world that we neglect the things of God, of heaven – the things of the spirit. It is a warning against the getting so caught up in the immediate – jobs and occupations and possessions, all that we give of our substance and time to material things, to getting and spending – that we neglect to render unto God, to keep first things first. What T. S. Eliot called “The Permanent Things.”

We come to church to be reminded about those things, that in our life together and in our individual lives we not be so distracted by the concerns of the day that we neglect the matters of eternity. To keep our minds and hearts directed to high and holy purposes. To keep perspective on what matters little so that we do not neglect what matters much. To take ultimate things with ultimate seriousness. To render unto God what is God’s.