

**HEADS OR TAILS**  
**Matthew 22:15-21**  
**Preached by Dr. Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, October 19, 2014**

If you've been worshipping here more times than not since early September, perhaps you've been aware of the recurring theme in the lectionary's Gospel readings. The religious leaders' attempts to outwit Jesus reminds me of Wiley Coyote trying to trap the roadrunner but always getting hoisted in his own petard.

The Pharisees were now getting so desperate they began plotting against Jesus with their biggest enemies the Herodians, giving credence to the old saying "the enemy of my enemy I my friend." Arm in arm they approached Jesus hoping to snooker him in a game of chance.

"Let's flip a coin Jesus, Heads we win, tails you lose!"

These guys thought they were finally setting the perfect trap by asking Jesus, in public, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?"

They had to be giddy at the thought of hammering Jesus with the mother of all trick questions. If he answered, "It's wrong to pay taxes to the pagan Gentiles," the Herodians, followers of King Herod who owed his throne to the Romans, would arrest Jesus on the spot for high treason. But if Jesus said, "Go ahead pay your taxes to the Emperor," then, the Pharisees reckoned, Jesus would lose his popular support with the people who hated their Roman conquerors.

Either way the Pharisees and the Herodians were absolutely sure Jesus was checkmated at last.

Being cagey, or so they thought, they approached Jesus with due deference acting as if they were innocent of any chicanery.

"Rabbi," they said respectfully, "we know you are sincere and teach the way of God..."

Right away Jesus must have smelled a rat, and after branding them as hypocrites he proceeded to expose their treachery by asking them to take out a coin, which happened to be a coin with the image of Caesar and the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, the son of the Diving Augustus."

Jesus could of asked, "Why did you bring a pagan Roman coin into God's holy temple?" but he didn't. Instead he put them on the defensive with the simple question, "Whose image is this?"

I'm sure the Pharisees thought Jesus was stalling for time, trying to sidestep their knockout question so playing along they answered, "Duh, it's the Emperor's."

That's when Jesus, a la the Road Runner, caught them in their own rap. "Then give to the Emperor things that are the Emperor's and to God things that are God's."

Now, at this point I need to remind you that instead of cheering Jesus for effortlessly sidestepping the mean old Pharisees' trap, maybe we should realize Jesus is taking aim at you and me too.

How can I say that? Because two thousand years later we still tend to blur the same boundaries separating Christ's Kingdom and the world culture. Remember, Jesus said, "Be in the world but not of it." What does that mean?

Some people tend to answer by naming and then resisting the blatant, moral infidelities that now pass for acceptable behavior in society such as obscene language, sexual promiscuity and the "selfie" lifestyle. On the other extreme there are those who'd argue that "being in the world but not of it" means questioning authority and if necessary being a rebel standing up against conformity.

Of course these could be perfectly acceptable answers, if the ones giving them aren't being self-righteous. By that I mean they think they can do no wrong because they have it all figured out, their attitudes and behaviors are above reproach, or so they think.

That was the Pharisees' blind spot. They easily identified the wrong in others but they couldn't admit they were just as guilty as the most obvious sinner probably because their sin was more subtle and therefore even more insidious because it bred a contempt and intolerance for others. That's why Jesus warned the Pharisees, "The tax collectors and sinners will enter the Kingdom before you."

One of the notions the Church (with a capital "C") in our Post Christian culture has to cast aside and leave behind is that the less the Christian has contact with the world the better. Sects like the Amish would be in this category. "Let us alone world. We won't bother you so don't bother us."

Then there are those church people who believe Jesus is coming again real soon, so they convince themselves since the world is godless and lost any way they should hunker down, keep to their little prayer groups and wait for Jesus to rescue them from the sin and degradation of this present age. You have to wonder, could these folks be actually hiding from the problems of the world and only care about saving themselves?

Since the last decades of the twentieth century two competing factions have been organizing themselves. Battle lines were drawn between the Christian left and the Christian right each side accusing the other of ramming their respective political agendas down each

other's throats. With the holidays approaching you can expect the "Christmas Wars" will be fought again with the religious right demanding we keep Christ in Christmas in the public square while others will argue that the celebration of Christmas shouldn't be inflicted on non believers.

So rendering unto Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that belong to God has been reinterpreted in ways Jesus never imagined. For example, loyalty to one's country has been lumped in with faithfulness to God. On the other hand for others rendering what belongs to Caesar and God means the enforcement of the so called separation between Church and State, which by the way is nowhere to be found in the Constitution.

Anyway whatever side of the argument you take, you have to admit at least one thing, not unlike the Pharisee who produced the coin bearing the image of the Divine Caesar during his own religious battle, we are just as guilty of compromising our allegiance to Christ and his Kingdom whenever it comes down to wanting to make our lives more convenient for ourselves and our kind.

You see, following Jesus and "living in the world but not of it" isn't as neat and simple as it sounds. You can't get away with saying, "heads I win, tails you lose," and then think you won the argument. You can't claim complete obedience to God as long as you hold Caesar's coin in your hand, and we all do.

But "Giving unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to god" isn't a 50/50 proposition because ultimately whether you like it or not everything belongs to God starting with your body, mind and soul which God gave you so you can live and serve in this world as one of God's agents of grace.

At least up until now no government agencies in this country is keeping tabs on or curtailing our religious beliefs and practices. There have been attempts to do so but so far so good. Be that as it may be, the Christian has a greater responsibility than most citizens to be vigilant and I don't mean by winning the culture wars to re-establish America as a Christian nation. To be honest I don't think the United States ever really was a Christian nation. If we were there'd never have been slavery and the Native Americans wouldn't have been so shamefully treated by the likes of the man on our twenty dollar bill and others.

That's precisely why it can be argued the Culture Wars have already been lost a long time ago but that doesn't mean Christ has been kicked out of the classroom or the public square. The fact is he's still there, he never left. God's authority hasn't been watered down and God's will continues to be done despite our best efforts to thwart it.

In the olden days people in every nation comforted themselves believing God was on their side. Think about this, just one hundred years ago this month the armies of Europe marched against each other crying out slogans like, "God is with us," and "God save the king,"

and “God punish France,” or “God gives us victory.” If God wasn’t God, I’m sure he’d have been conflicted, if not confused.

Hopefully in the here and now we unlearned the slogan God is on our side and have learned to ask, “Are we on God’s side?” In other words do we really believe in the ultimate sovereignty of God over his creation and then go out into his world to bring Christ’s Gospel of love, justice and peace? And then this: when we see or hear about something or someone violating or dehumanizing a person or a tribe of people who have no friend or helper do we speak up and when necessary act up not to cram a Christian agenda down anyone’s throats, but to promote the essence of Christ’s Gospel, to do unto others and for others as we would have them do to and for us?

Render unto Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and unto God the things that belong to God. In short put God and his Christ first and foremost in every decision, professional and personal, public and private.

Be in the world but not of it.

Give to Caesar what is Caesars and to God what is God’s.

Words to live by.

How do you think your life and our world would be different if we really did?