

## SERMON ON MATTHEW 22:15-22

Preached by Emily Rotch

at the Episcopal Church of St. John Baptist in Thomaston, Maine,

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Lord open our eyes to your presence

Grant us a vision to see what we can achieve:

as your love touches us may we reach out to others. Amen

The Pharisee's question to Jesus in today's reading surely qualifies as one of the all time famous trick questions on the order of "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?" As we have just heard they lead up to it with an overload of flattery: "We know you are sincere and teach the way of God", but it wasn't intended to be nice- it was a trap. In their defense, it's true Jesus hasn't been at all respectful and nice to them. Think back over the readings we've heard over the last few weeks-we've had the King who gave a wedding banquet and took violent exception to one guest's wedding clothes. We've had the dishonest servants who killed the owner's son so they could steal the vineyard, we've had Jesus telling the chief priests that thieves and prostitutes would get to the kingdom ahead of them, all stories aimed at the "scribes and Pharisees". So, they were out to get him, posing a question they believed had no "right" answer. If Jesus said it was lawful to pay the tax he was in trouble with the common people who had no love for their Roman overlords and their taxes, if he said it was wrong to pay the tax he was in trouble with the authorities including his questioners who had the job of collecting the tax. I wish I could have been a fly on the wall. They thought they were so clever-so what does Jesus do-he pulls the rug out from under them by answering on completely different grounds.

It tells me so much about his questioners that they didn't anticipate his doing any such thing in spite of their recent experiences with him. I don't want to be too hard on the Pharisees. They were living in a box constructed of many many religious rules and observances. All churches, temples and synagogues make boxes for themselves over time and we all cling to what we know. How many Episcopal jokes turn on the line:"But we've never done it that way before." I have to admit I've heard this story in the past as win/lose very much as they must have invented it. One of the great gifts of the parables is their ability to turn our thinking upside down. Here was this yes or no, black and white, right or wrong question and here is an answer that sounds obvious when said but moves the whole conversation to another place, out of the box of black and white. Jesus' answer leaves the world of rules behind and brings his listeners to relationship; who decides "what is Caesars? What is Gods?" The pharisees will have to decide each for themselves, just as we do: we're having a national conversation right now over flags and anthems with a confusion of "right" answers.

It's easy and human to make rules and to live in a world of rules. We need them: remember how you felt the last time someone ran a red light in front of you! It's much harder to understand what we owe to God. There's always the potential for conflict between those two loyalties. The passage as it stands doesn't solve questions like that- it leaves it to us to find our own answers. What do we owe earthly authority? What do we owe to God? The Jews of Jesus day faced those conflicts of loyalty and the coin in the story is a great symbol of that reality. It was Roman (as required by the authorities) with a portrait of Caesar-making it a constant reminder of their lower status, and it had an inscription referring to the "divinity" of Caesar, which was heresy to Jews. A clear symbol of conflicting obligations.

The fact that the "scribes and pharisees" were unable to foresee Jesus' answer hints at the ways rules by themselves can blind us. Jesus offered a rule but one that gives room for individuality, choice, room for changing circumstances. He leaves room for relationship, for love. Think about the owner of the vineyard who paid his workers all alike as a symbol of how God treats us. How do we treat our obligations to others? Which approach will illumine our lives and bring joy? When does clinging to the "right" rules hurt others? Are there times when our obligations to God might interfere with our obligation to "Caesar"? The passage says "When they heard this, they were amazed; and went away." Maybe some of them were changed by the conversation. We don't get to know. What Jesus said offered them possibilities for change-just as the passage is inviting us to consider our answers. I hope that my answers will be open to new possibilities; that my trust in God will continue to offer me opportunities to grow and change. That I can let go of my certainties when they limit my ability to leave room for" the other".

I want to close with the second half of the prayer I started with:

Lord, stretch our capabilities, extend our vision and increase our sense of purpose, that we may grow in our service of you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, are one God for ever Amen Prayer from David Adams Traces of Glory