

WHERE DO YOU DRAW THE LINE?

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Jesus said, *“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s. (Matthew 21:21)”*

Once upon a time two tourists happened to meet each other at a scenic overlook of the Grand Canyon. The first man was overcome by the beauty of the sight and said aloud, “What marvelous works the Lord has done!” Then he even quoted a verse from today’s Psalm: *Oh, the majesty and magnificence of his presence! Oh, the power and the splendor of his sanctuary!* The second man, impressed by the other’s zeal for the Lord of hosts asked, “Are you a Christian?” The first man replied, “Yes, I’m an Episcopalian.” The second man smiled, “So am I! What are the chances?” And they shook hands. The first man asked, “Do you like Rite I or Rite II?” The second man replied, “I prefer the traditional language of Rite I.” “The Lord be with you,” beamed the first. “And with thy spirit,” replied the second. And they gave each other a high five. Then the second man asked, “Morning Prayer or the Eucharist?” The first man replied, “Morning Prayer.” The second man chimed in, “Long may it flourish!” And they agreed to exchange Christmas cards that very year.

As they were entering each other’s addresses in their respective phones, the first man said, “What a small world! I see that you live in New York City. So do I. I go to Grace Church. Where do you go to church?” The second man raised his eyebrows and said, “I go to Grace Church too. Funny that we haven’t met.” A profound silence ensued as they gazed at the beauty of nature, and marveled at God’s mysterious ways that would bring together in this place two people with such correct liturgical and theological affinity. Finally, the first man broke the silence and said, “How about that capital campaign? It was a real success, and now it’s time for the annual campaign. In fact, I’m chairing it, so I’ll be sending you a pledge card long before I send you a Christmas card.” The second man took in all these words. He looked to the right, then looked to the left, then he said, “Die, you heretic!” And he pushed the first man over the side of the cliff!

Throughout this week, as I puzzled over today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew, I eventually recalled the story of the two tourists in its generic form. You see, Matthew records an incident that highlights the growing hostility of the Pharisees towards Jesus. In first-century Palestine, the Pharisees were the Jewish religious authorities who interpreted the Law of Moses and translated precisely how people should go about obeying it. Jesus, the itinerate rabbi, was preaching a new and radical way to follow the Law and fulfill it. One might think that nothing but smiles, handshakes, and high-fives would have prevailed between Jesus and the Pharisees. They were all devout Jews who walked in the ways of the Law and the prophets. The Pharisees claimed to be awaiting God’s promised Messiah, the anointed one who would rescue the Jews from all forms of oppression. More and more, Jesus was dropping clear hints that he himself was the one to come in the name of the Lord. He was an heir of David, a worker of miracles, and had just ridden into Jerusalem astride a donkey, in fulfillment of the prophet Zechariah.

Sadly, for all their potential for theological affinity, instead of agreement, the way of Jesus eventually clashed with the way of the Pharisees. Thus, the institutional clerics became ever more determined to silence the rival voice. They wanted to entangle Jesus in his talk, and either get him trouble with the Roman authorities, or get him in trouble with the Jewish people. So the Pharisees crafted what they imagined would be the perfect, inescapable lose-lose question for Jesus: *“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”*

On the one hand, if Jesus were to say, “Yes, it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor,” the Pharisees would be able to incite the crowds to yell, “die, you heretic!” Why? Because the Jews hated paying taxes to the Romans beyond the reasons why most people hate paying taxes. They considered the Romans to be the illegal occupiers of the land that God had given to them. What is more, the Romans were pagans whose prayers could not possibly ascend even to the general direction of the one, true God of Israel. In fact, the Roman emperors claimed to be divine themselves, and said as much on the coins they stamped with their own images on them. Thus, paying taxes to the emperor was a form of idolatry. To use unclean Roman money was blasphemy; it was to imply that you agreed with the emperor’s claim to divinity. “Die, you heretic,” is what the Pharisees could shout if Jesus said yes.

On the other hand, what if Jesus were to say no? Well, if Jesus were to say no, it is against the Law of Moses to pay taxes to the emperor, he would arouse the ire of Rome and be arrested. The Romans, then, would be able to shout, “Die, you rebel.” Paying taxes to the emperor was simply the economic law of the land. Anyone counseling ordinary citizens to disobey Roman law would be charged as an enemy of the state, and might even wind up being crucified. The Pharisees were insufferably pleased with their little scheme. Either way Jesus would lose.

But Jesus saw right through to the hypocrisy of the question. When the Pharisees posed it, Jesus asked them to show him a coin used for the tax. Quick as a flash, one of the Pharisees produced a denarius – the Roman coin with the emperor’s image on it. Hold on: if the Pharisees were dead-set against blasphemy, why did at least one of them have the unclean Roman coin in his purse? The answer is simple: they weren’t practicing what they preached. They were hypocrites. When Jesus asked them whose head was on the coin, they admitted it was the emperor’s. So Jesus said, *“Give, therefore, to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”*

What do you think? Are you satisfied with the answer Jesus gave? Over the centuries Biblical scholars and commentators have tried to understand what Jesus really meant by responding the way he did. Some have taken his words to speak to what today we call the separation of church and state, or God and the emperor. Most, however, have concluded that in answering the question, Jesus didn’t really answer it at all. He dodged it. Indeed, the genius of Jesus was simply in the way he avoided the Pharisee’s trap. While we can admire Jesus as the artful dodger, still we might yearn for more specific guidance on where to draw the line between the sacred and the secular.

What happens when symbols of state clash with conscience or theological conviction? Frankly, it remains an open question, if not an open wound in America today. The Pharisees were upset by images of the emperor in their sacred spaces: the land, the Temple. Likewise, many people today are troubled by certain images in this land that clash with the ideals of liberty and justice for all. I refer, of course, to images of the Confederacy. Some say these monuments, statues, and sculptures tell an important part of American history, and should be preserved. Others argue that they merely glorify an armed insurrection against the union in support of slavery. Thus, they should be removed. Where do you draw the line? Taking down a flag is one thing, but what do you do with something the size of the carvings on Stone Mountain, near Atlanta, depicting Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis? Gutzon Borglum, the original sculptor of Stone Mountain was a member of the KKK. But he also carved Mt. Rushmore and statues at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. So are all his works compromised? Was he a heretic, or a rebel? Where do you draw the line? I mean not to raise anyone’s ire unnecessarily, but merely to point out the similarity between the roiling passions of Jesus’ day and ours. So I ask again: what do you think of Jesus’ reply to the question? Would a more specific answer have been helpful then and now? How much simpler it might have been had Jesus been more forthright in saying: This is blasphemy, that isn’t. This needs to go, that doesn’t.

Perhaps Jesus was onto something other than simple solutions. Rather than playing the artful dodger, perhaps Jesus was practicing a deep trust in the ways of God. I have no doubt that Jesus truly believed that he himself was God's anointed one – the messiah. What is also clear is that the prophet Isaiah profoundly shaped Jesus' own understanding of himself and his mission. In studying Isaiah, Jesus would have encountered the reading we heard today (45:1-7), in which the prophet preached good news to the captive people in Babylonian exile. Isaiah declared that Cyrus of Persia was coming to their rescue. In fact, Cyrus was the Lord's anointed. But wait: Cyrus was a foreigner and a pagan, most likely a worshipper of Marduk. His prayers could not possibly reach the Lord, the true and living God of Israel. Cyrus was a world conqueror with a wanderlust for power. Yes, for a man of his time he was tolerant and enlightened, but he was also subduing races and nations on a grand scale to satisfy his own ambition. He would get no federal holiday in his name today, nor a monument in any public park. How could Cyrus be the Lord's anointed? Isaiah was emphatic that he was: *Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue the nations before him and strip kings of their robes ...*

Apparently, Jesus knew the prophets better than the Pharisees knew them. Jesus knew that God could choose anyone to accomplish the divine purposes, therefore he was loathe to draw any lines between sacred and secular, between clean and unclean, heretic and true believer. God is the maker of all things. *I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things,* is how Isaiah preached it. So again, rather than evading the issue, Jesus was displaying trust in the power of God to work out his purposes through pagan kings, Roman emperors, and anyone who knew or knew not the God of Israel.

Leo Tolstoy was a 19th century Russian author, widely acclaimed as one of the greatest writers of all time. In 1886 he published a short story entitled *The Three Hermits*. The story goes that a bishop on a sea voyage comes upon a small island where three elderly hermits live alone, praying for the salvation of their souls and for the souls of others. The bishop, believing it is his calling to teach the Christian faith, persuades the ship's captain to stop so he can meet the hermits and instruct them. Once ashore he finds the three godly men, but quickly realizes that their faith is rather inadequate, even heretical. When the bishop asks them how they pray, one of the hermits replies, "We pray like this: 'Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us!'" Then all three of them raised their eyes to heaven and repeated, "Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us!" The bishop smiles at their childlike prayer, saying, "Obviously, you've heard something about the Holy Trinity, but you don't pray correctly." So the bishop spends the rest of the day painstakingly teaching them to pray the Our Father. They are not quick to catch on, but finally by sunset, when they can recite the prayer from start to finish, the bishop departs.

Once on the ship again and out to sea the bishop thinks to himself how pleased the old men were to learn the Lord's Prayer. Indeed, he thanks God for having sent him there to teach and help such godly men. What a good thing he did in correcting their prayers. Just then he sees a light off the stern of the ship, rapidly approaching across the sea. In amazement he realizes that it is the three hermits, running across the water as only Christ could do, all gleaming white, their grey beards shining. They confess to the bishop that already they have forgotten how to pray as he had taught them. "Teach us again," they say. The bishop crosses himself, and with newfound humility replies, "Your own prayer will reach the Lord, O men of God. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinners."

I believe that Tolstoy's story makes a similar point to the message we hear in today's readings from Matthew and Isaiah. We dare not draw lines between what belongs to God and what belongs to the emperor because God owns all of it. To accomplish his purposes on earth, God can seize the hand of any and all flawed human beings – whether they be Roman or Persian, bishop or hermit, emperor or Pharisee, you or me. With such faith *we worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. We sing to the Lord a new song. We sing to the Lord, all the whole earth.*