

October 16, 2011 18th Sunday After Pentecost Matthew 22:15-22

On the wall behind me is projected the back of a one dollar bill. On the left side is the reverse of the Great Seal of the United States. The seal is loaded with imagery. Most interesting of all is perhaps the triangular "eye" over the pyramid. This eye is called the "Eye of Providence" or the Eye of God, and it is a reminder that God is watching everything we do. The Eye of Providence is not a specifically Christian symbol. It dates back to the ancient Egyptians and it has been used by many religions over time. In the Middle Ages Christians began to use it and see the triangular shape as a reference to the Trinity.

The Eye of Providence comes to be on our nation's seal through this Christian interpretation. Above the eye and to the left and right are the words "annuit coeptis" which is Latin for "God has favored our undertakings." That's quite a bold statement for our country's founding fathers to make. But then so are the words under the pyramid, "novus ordo seclorum" or, the new world order. The Great Seal has been around a long

time. You'll remember that the words, "In God We Trust" are quite a recent addition to our money.

The One Dollar Bill sends quite a mixed message about our understanding of God and money. In one place it boldly proclaims God's favor. In another it says we place our trust in God, not the government or its money. And yet we humbly consent to the truth that God's judging eye is upon all that we do.

American money is hardly the first money to bear heavy theological meanings. In our gospel reading we have Jesus tricking the Pharisees and Herodians into convicting themselves when they bring out a Roman coin in response to Jesus saying, "Show me the coin used for the tax."

The Pharisees and the Herodians had set what they thought was a sure trap for Jesus. This scene takes place roughly on Tuesday of Holy Week. Just a day or so before Jesus had caused a huge stir in the temple when he overturned the tables of the money changers and drove out the merchants. That may have been a vivid symbolic action in keeping with the prophets, but it didn't win Jesus any favors among the Jewish leadership. They

saw him as a threat. What would happen if he caused a real and true riot to happen during the Passover holidays? The Romans were known to clamp down on violence with brutality. Plus, this Jesus guy was very popular among the common people. He threatened to undermine the power of the religious elite.

So a very interesting pairing happens. The Pharisees and the Herodians join forces. This is an unlikely pair of allies. The Pharisees generally rejected the Herodians because they didn't accept the Herod family as legitimate Jews. The Herodians for their part didn't like the Pharisees either. But you know the saying, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." And so, ironically, in order to get rid of Jesus they join forces. Ironically because Jesus is bringing enemies together even as they reject him.

They set a trap for Jesus. Jesus is in the temple again. There are crowds around, many of them very interested to hear what Jesus has to say. It is a perfect time to take him down. They approach him and ask, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and

show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality." What flatterers! You probably learned in your childhood that if you want something from your mom or dad, or if you have to break the news that you've just done something really bad or stupid, butter them up first. Of course Jesus sees right through this.

They go on, "Tell us then, what you think. It is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" That's a really nasty question with no good answer. I imagine the Pharisees and Herodians conspiring beforehand to trick him in this. They were probably delighted with themselves because Jesus is in trouble no matter how he answers. If he says yes, pay taxes to the emperor then the Jewish people would reject him as a Roman supporter. If Jesus says don't pay the taxes they will turn him over to the Romans as a troublemaker.

Jesus says, "Show me the coin used for the tax." And right there within the temple grounds, the most holy place in the world for Jews, the place where the Ten Commandments should certainly be observed; especially about not making any graven images or having any other Gods, the Pharisees and Herodians

whip out a Roman coin, the denaris. The denaris has the graven image of the emperor's head and the words, "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Augustus."

In the big picture of political bumbles this ranks among the big ones! The whole point of having money changers at the temple was to change your Roman money with these images on them to Jewish money acceptable within the holy temple. Well, so much for the well laid plans of the Pharisees and Herodians. They now have egg on their face. Of course Jesus makes it clear what they have done when he says, "Whose head is this and whose title?" They are forced to publically admit that they have brought graven images into the temple. They should have said, "We don't have any Roman coins on us because this is the temple. Let's go outside so we can get one." But they didn't. So much for their 'holier than thou' leadership! Notice that Jesus didn't have a Roman coin in his pocket.

Jesus concludes the scene by getting the last word, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's."

Some people have wrongfully interpreted Jesus to mean here a teaching on the separation of church and state. Also, this is no pronouncement that the world is broken into two realms - religion and government; or perhaps religious and secular. That would be to create a dualism that is not part of God's world order. The kingdom of God represented by Jesus embraces all of life.

The Bible is clear that loyalty to God is a different and higher category than loyalty to Caesar or a government. This text is not an instruction on how you, living in this complex world of loyalties, should determine what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God.

What this Bible passage does teach is that the distinction between what belongs to Caesar (as some things do) and what belongs to God (the ultimate loyalty) must be made. And the Bible leaves it up to your own situations to determine the distinction.

I started off by saying the dollar bill gives a mixed notion of the relationship between God and money. In one place

it puts the eye of God. So every time you do something with a dollar know that God is watching! The bill has the imprint right on it in order to remind you. Then there is the almost arrogant statement, "God favors our undertakings." That's got it backwards. It would be better to say, "We favor God's undertakings." And yet I think this mixed message is the right one for us.

Our loyalty to God and God's purposes is ultimate. Nothing should ever come in the way of that. But how we express it can become murky. Pay your taxes. The government won't like it if you don't! And besides, the government provides you with the safety and freedom to go about your work for God. And yet the power of money is not yours. It never was and it never will be. It is God's. So use it well. Remember that every dollar invested or spent is a dollar used under the eye of God. Use what you have consciously, not carelessly, for it is God's stewardship entrusted to you. Amen