

October 16, 2011

TRICK QUESTIONS

This past week, Dave and I were on stand-by to babysit grandkids as Dave's daughter Amy awaited word as to whether she would be called for jury duty.

For four nights after 5, she had to call a recorded number to find out whether to report for jury duty the next day. The first three times, she was told she was not needed tomorrow, but she still had to call the next day to make sure she wasn't needed the following day. Finally, the fourth day's announcement said she was excused from jury duty.

For Amy, it was just a nuisance that she didn't quite know how to schedule her week. She didn't feel so put out when she learned that an area pastor was in the same boat as her.

In fact, the pastor had called the clerk's office on Monday to talk to a real person and see whether they knew for sure if he'd be needed. They told him they knew there were no cases through Tuesday, but there was a chance he'd be needed on Wednesday. "I could have come Monday or Tuesday, and I can come on Thursday, but I can't come in on Wednesday," the pastor explained. "I have a funeral that day."

To which the clerk responded, "Then you better find someone else to do the funeral."

The pastor protested. The funeral was for a 30-plus year member of the church, and a 10-plus year parishioner to the pastor. There wasn't anyone else the pastor would ask to do the funeral, because he felt he needed to be there to honor the deceased and comfort the family.

To which the clerk responded, "You have two choices. If you are supposed to have jury duty Wednesday, be in the courtroom on Wednesday morning. Otherwise, we will send the police to your home to arrest you for contempt of court."

How's that for a choice? As I told Amy, "I would have said fine. Send the police to arrest me if you have to. But then we'll see whether you can find a jury to convict me."

For those who might approach this dilemma from a legal rather than an emotional mindset, I wouldn't recommend citing separation of church and state. As Jesus demonstrated in today's scripture, we as Christians have responsibilities as citizens of this world if we are going to make use of the services of our local government. But that is just the first part of a dual citizenship that we ultimately are to claim.

We began our scripture with Matthew 22:15, but beginning back in Matthew 21, Jesus has been hammered with questions by the religious authorities. First the chief priests and elders tried to ensnare Jesus; Jesus in turn went on the attack and gave three parables that spoke against the orthodox Jewish leaders.

So now those most knowledgeable of religious and political laws – the Pharisees and Herodians – they join forces in a counterattack in the form of a question: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?

The Jews in fact paid three regular taxes to the Roman government. They had to pay one tenth of their grain and one fifth of their oil and wine production to Rome – a tax paid in the produce itself. There also was a one-percent income tax – again, something that could be paid in wares instead of actual legal tender.

But what the authorities were specifically asking Jesus was about the poll tax. Every male age 14 to 65 and every female age 12 to 65 was to pay one denarius. And that coin was minted with the emperor's head and one of two inscriptions. Both had "Tiberius, Caesar, the high priest." One coin further hailed him as the Son of Augustus and the other coin hailed him as "the

majestic son of God.” As far as the Jews were concerned, either was a violation of the commandments to have no other gods and no graven images or idols.

In 6 AD, the Jews had rioted, outraged at the idea that they had to pay the poll tax with a coin acknowledging the Roman emperor as their king. In their opinion, God was the only king. To claim anything else was an insult to God. The revolt was overthrown, but the tempest over taxes continued to brew under the surface of Jewish opinion.

That’s why the authorities thought this was the perfect trap to spring on Jesus. If he said yes the tax was unlawful, the people would love him, but the Herodians could arrest him on behalf of the Roman government for treason. On the other hand, if Jesus said no, the tax was not legitimate, then the Jews clamoring to hear him would turn their backs on him and return to the Pharisees, who were against the taxes on principle.

The authorities had to have been a bit smug about this whole scenario. Jesus is either going to be arrested and shut up, or he is going to offend the crowds. What could possibly go wrong?

But when confronted with a yes or no kind of question, Jesus always seemed to find a third option. In this case, he asks to see a coin. Notice, Jesus didn’t pull it out of his own pocket. This is vital, because it means the coin produced by the Pharisees came from their own pockets.

Why is this important? Because to produce a denarius, it meant they had to be carrying a denarius – a coin minted by the emperor, and therefore legally the property of the emperor.

And the thing is, the Pharisees didn’t have to carry that coin. Because of the outrage of the Jews, Jerusalem officials minted a different coin: one that was equal to a denarius and accepted by all merchants in the area, but one without the offensive words and image. A Jew who wanted to avoid blasphemy and contamination from the handling of the Roman stamped

coin could carry the other coin instead. It was a small hassle, so only a small minority of Jews went to the trouble – but those who did were admired for holding fast to their belief.

So when the Pharisees produce a coin with the emperor's face on it, the coin itself declares that they are using the property of the emperor whose image it bore. That's why Jesus says, "Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor." If they are going to use Roman coins, then they are responsible for paying for that privilege.

There's a story of a pastor who got a call one day from the Internal Revenue Service. "Mr. Bob Smith says on last year's tax form that he made a \$3,000 contribution to your congregation," the agent said. "Is that true?"

After a significant pause, the pastor replied, "Well, if he didn't, he will."

The vast majority of those listening to me today are American citizens. Because of that citizenship, we have certain privileges. We have safety provided by our servicemen and women. We have standards for our food quality and the right to travel interstate highways. (Even in Hawaii, they have interstates, which doesn't really make sense to me!) And most of us carry dollar bills, quarters, nickels, dimes and pennies – or we carry a plastic card that when used even overseas, converts our money into American currency. And yes, we pay taxes to the IRS.

That's because as citizens, we receive these services for which we bear a debt of obligation. We don't have to accept these things. The Amish don't. They don't have state-issued driver's licenses or Social Security cards, they don't have car insurance, bank accounts and so forth. But I think most of us appreciate the convenience and stability of the services we receive, and take full advantage of them. That's because when it gets right down to it, most of us are grateful for our privileges as citizens of the United States.

But if we are going to partake of the services, then we need to be responsible citizens. We must accept our part in the administration of this government, and that includes paying the taxes we owe to support these provisions.

But don't go home today thinking this was the point of Jesus' answer, because there was a second part to it: Give to God what belongs to God.

Give to God what belongs to God. We sometimes forget that part of what Jesus had to say to the authorities today. He actually defused their trap with the first part of his answer, but the second part is in fact more important than the first.

Give to God what belongs to God. The image of former presidents may be stamped on our coins, but we were created in the image of God. Therefore, God's image and God's name is stamped on every part of our lives – social, economic, political and religious. We may pay U.S. based currency to pay our taxes, but we ourselves do not belong to the United States' government. We do belong to God.

This week, may we seek to be good citizens of the nation we claim as our own, and may we be good stewards of all God has given to us.