

November 8, 2020

*"A Denarius"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 12:13-17

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

I want to start today with a little quiz. What person is best described by the following three titles: King, Son of God, High Priest? What person is best described by the three titles: King, Son of God, High Priest? Now I'm sure most of you would answer this question by telling me it's Jesus. While that's correct, I'm only going to only give you half credit for your answer. Why? Well basically, that's what today Scripture lesson is all about. Who is the real king, the real God you follow, and what are the implications around following that king? So let's look further at today's Gospel message – a familiar one.

The Pharisees are once again trying to get Jesus to say something they could use against him. This time though, they bring with them a new group you may not have heard of before, called the Herodians. The Herodians, as the name implies, were supporters of King Herod. Now Herod was in power in Judea at the behest of the Roman government. He was the political and military leader, also responsible for collecting taxes for the empire. So together they come up with a great political question to entrap Jesus: "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?" But before asking the question, in order to grease the skids, they excessively flatter Jesus as part of their strategy to get him to speak plainly and reveal himself. They comment on his truthfulness and his refusal to pander to those in power or say only what people want to hear. Then they ask him, "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?" Because we all know that taxes mean money, and money means power. And the Roman government, just like any government, wanted to ensure they would stay in power by taxing the population accordingly. Anybody that refused to pay the taxes, would suffer the consequences. Now to illustrate just how serious governments are regarding the matter of taxes, I'll remind you about one of America's most notorious criminals, Al Capone. He was responsible for the murders of hundreds of people. Yet he wasn't convicted for any of them. What he was convicted of, was tax evasion, and for that he went to jail. That's how serious governments are when it comes to their money and power.

But getting back to the Scripture. The Pharisees and Herodians pose a question to Jesus regarding the payment of taxes to the Roman government. And here's the deal – if Jesus speaks out against paying taxes, it would be viewed as treason against Rome. The Herodians would witness the sedition, and Jesus will be subject to prosecution. This was a real threat because at the time, there were many false

prophets who were gaining the confidence of the masses and trying to stir revolts against the Roman government. Just twenty-five years prior, a man named Judas the Galilean claimed that Roman taxes were unjustified and urged everyone not to pay. With an armed band he even went into the Temple and tried to cleanse it. But the Romans quickly caught and executed him. Now here is Jesus in a similar situation. He, in fact, did cleanse the Temple which turned out to be extremely unpopular. So now does he say “No” to paying the tax, given the consequences? But on the other hand, if Jesus consents to the validity of the Roman tax, he would discredit himself as the Messiah – the one who came to bring forth the Kingdom of God, not to support the Kingdom of Rome, thus possibly alienating, even losing his followers, who hated paying taxes to Rome. So, no matter what Jesus’ answer is, the Pharisees are so sure they can destroy his reputation with their question, that they literally asked it twice. “Is it right to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Should we pay them, or shouldn’t we?” Two questions that really boil down to only one simple, yes or no, answer. There's no way to get around it! I can just imagine them rubbing their hands together in anticipation, waiting for Jesus to slip up and make a mistake.

But knowing their hypocrisy, Jesus prepares to answer them with perhaps the greatest divinely inspired one-liner of all times. First, though, he says, "Bring me a denarius and let me see it." Imagine that – our King... King Jesus, doesn't even have a denarius in his pocket. A denarius was the smallest amount of money a poor person needed in order to survive for just a day. It would be the equivalent of a dollar or two, today. It's something you might give a panhandler on the street. “Can you spare a dollar or two so I can get a hamburger at McDonald's?” And our King doesn't even have a dollar in his pocket. So he asks for somebody to bring him a denarius. And then he forces the Pharisees to look at it, and he then asks them a question, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answer, “It's Caesar's!” Now there's more to this than meets the eye. You see, the image on the coin was that of Tiberius Caesar. But there was also an inscription. And the inscription read, “Tiberius Caesar, son of the god Augustus Caesar, high priest.” So consider the contradiction presented by this denarius. The Pharisees are asking the true King, the true son of God, the true high Priest... representing the Kingdom of God... to allow his authority to be subjugated by a professed king of the world. But Jesus wouldn't have it. Instead I can imagine Jesus tossing the coin back to them with the rejoinder, “Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but to God the things that are God's.” Thus satisfying both the earthly authorities and God. And as the Scripture says, “They were utterly amazed at him.” They were utterly amazed at his answer!

Now there are a number of important takeaways from our lesson today. But I'll focus on two. The first and most obvious is how we look at money. Because this whole discussion is based on money – everybody wants it. Thus, money takes on an almost God-like status. We live in a society that has long since moved beyond the satisfaction of just having our basic human needs met to now the gratification of all our wants and desires. And so now we look to money to provide us not only security, but power, material possessions, status, convenience and so much more. So we need to be careful that our admiration for money doesn't turn into self-indulgence or pride or greed. Our money definitely has its place, but it is not meant to replace our admiration and worship of God. Former Dean of Duke University Chapel, the Rev. James Cleland, loved to tell the story about the time he was a young pastor and he was paid the, then astounding, sum of \$300, just to be a guest preacher. When he got back home he proudly told his mother of his good fortune and how much money he had made. “\$300 for just for one sermon,” she said, “Oh son, there used to be a time when to betray our Lord they only had to pay Judas a few pieces of silver.” This is what happens when we make money our god.

And the second thing I want to focus on today are those words of Jesus, “Render to Caesar that which is Caesar’s and to God that which is God’s.” Everyone seems to remember the first part - render to Caesar that which is Caesar's. And certainly this election year with all the political dissention has probably made all of us think about our country, where we are, where we’re headed, and our role in that. How are we accountable as a United States citizen? Well, to use some of the words of President-elect Biden, “It's time to put away the harsh rhetoric, to listen to each other again, to stop treating each other as enemies. We are Americans.” And, as I said, we should be grateful that we live in a democratic republic where we have so many freedoms, where we have rights and privileges that many people in other countries do not have.

But what is most important for us today is the second part of Jesus' words, and to consider that our ultimate accountability is to render to God that which is God’s. And what is that? Well, certainly some of our money. I talked about stewardship recently and how it’s our responsibility to give to God’s work through this church. But there’s more. Because you see, if truth be told we are all part of the reason for the division in this country. Because we are more passionate about a political agenda, a social agenda or, most likely, a self-serving agenda, than we are passionate about God’s agenda. As I mentioned in my *Thought for the Day* last Wednesday, we were made to be citizens of heaven. And as such, we are called first to be on the side of God, and not on the side of a particular political party. To be on the side

of treating others with respect, even those with whom we disagree politically. To be on the side of working for justice for the least of these. To be on the side of showing mercy and forgiveness, even when we have been hurt. To be on the side of integrity, excellence, wisdom. To be on the side of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. Imagine if that were the agenda we were passionate about.

As I asked in the beginning, who is the real king we follow? The god of the state.... the god of money? As we go forward, with a new administration in place, let us always remember to render to God the things that are Gods. Render your deeds and actions, your thoughts and attitudes, your words, your life. Because no king of this world is going to forgive your sins, heal your wounds, comfort you when you are down, give you the strength you need to go on, give you peace that passes all understanding, love you unconditionally or assure you of life everlasting in heaven. Only King Jesus, Son of God, High Priest of Heaven can do that. Let us follow him. Amen.

Prayer: O Lord, we come humbly to worship and follow you. And we know that our ultimate home, our ultimate citizenship is with you. And we want to live as upstanding, righteous, citizens of heaven. But we also live right now in the United States of America. And so help us live also as upstanding citizens of our country. A country in need of healing, of peace, of tolerance. Lord, as you promised the Israelites, so may that same promise be for us now, as you said, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and I will heal their land." And so we pray. We pray for President Trump, for President-elect Biden, for all the leaders of our land. May they forge a path ahead that focuses on the issues in ways that unite us, leading us to a greater sense of commonality, a willingness to listen to one another, not with the intent to debate, but with the intent to understand. May they be willing to work and to sacrifice in order to close the gap of what divides us. And may we, the ordinary people of this country, also be willing to work and to sacrifice for that which unites us. May we look less at what is best for us personally, as individuals and families, and instead look at what is best for all God's children. Give us a big picture view, a God view of the needs around us. And in this way, by following you, our ultimate King and Redeemer, may we bring your kingdom here, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.