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Pentecost 22

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Alexandria, VA

## Jesu Juva

“The Image We Bear”  
Text: Matthew 22:15-21

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

*The Word of God that will serve as the basis for the sermon is the Holy Gospel just read.*

When I was at the Seminary, every seminarian had to go through what is called a “Theological Interview” before he was eligible to receive his first call. And that meant that two professors would go into a room with one student and get to bombard him with questions for an hour. Its one of those dreaded rites of passage that everyone feared. And the point is to try to ascertain, at least in some minimal degree, that each student is at least somewhat orthodox before sending him out to a church to preach and teach. At least, whatever you could ascertain in just the one hour you were given. . . . But there was also another point to this exercise, and that is to impress upon each future pastor – if he doesn’t realize it already – that he does not know everything, and how easy it is for the professors to entangle him in his words. The humble him a little bit! And that is often times exactly what happens.

And so how frustrated the Pharisees must have been getting with Jesus! The Pharisees, who considered themselves the experts in the Law and the teachers, or professors, of the people, and yet they had not been able to entangle Jesus in his words. And they tried, many times thinking they had Jesus right where they wanted Him, only to have Him slip through their fingers! And now time was running out. Jesus’ word and authority was undermining their word and authority. And so together with the Herodians – for politics makes strange bedfellows! – they hatch yet another entangling question: **“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”** And it really wasn’t a question about taxes, but a question designed not to have a right answer. For to answer “yes” would have Jesus fall out of favor with the Jews, and to answer “no” would get Him in trouble with Herod and Caesar and Rome. And so give the Pharisees some credit here! This was a pretty good, a pretty “entangling,” question, for Jesus’ latest “theological interview!”

But I suggest to you that there’s more going on here than just another challenge of Jesus and His Word and authority. This is no mere academic exercise. The Pharisees have

been trying that and it hasn't been working! All the hypothetical and theoretical questions and situations they pose to Jesus He has been able to answer. Academically, He is superior to them. And so today they try a different kind of entanglement: namely, life. For what good are all the words and wisdom of Jesus if they don't apply to real life? If they don't apply to what we are going through every day? If they don't make any difference to what I am going through here and now? So what about it Jesus? Bring your theology down to earth: ***“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”***

And isn't this the challenge for us as Christians and for the Church today? Not questions about paying taxes, but how many people today reject, or at least disregard, Christianity, not because it isn't true and right, but because it isn't practical? Because it doesn't make any difference? How many think of the Word of God as an “ideal,” that, however, must be *adjusted* to meet real life? How many think that the pure Word of God cannot stand up to the real world, as we know it? And how often do we struggle with that? When we say things like, “*Yes, I know that's what the Word of God says, but . . .*”

Because life is messy, isn't it? We live in a world of sin and vengeance, of divorce and infidelity and permissiveness, of abortion and mercy killing, of selfishness and greed, of every man for himself, of self-gratification and loopholes, a world of doing whatever works and whatever feels good. And so how far can we take God's Word into this world? How far is it *practical*? How can we **be generous** when people just want to take advantage of us? How can we **forgive** when people aren't sorry for what they did? How can we stand up for the **truth** when people will not even admit there is truth? How can we live in **peace** when there are terrorists and snipers out there waiting to put us in their crosshairs? How can we **love** others when they're so darn unlovable? That all sounds fine and good when we talk about it in here, and *yes, I know that's what the Word of God says, but . . .* but what about out there? It's a tangled mess out there.

The Pharisees weren't dumb! They lived in the same kind of messy and difficult world we do, and with their question they hoped to set up an impossible situation, where the words of Jesus could not prevail. A tangled mess. ***“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”*** They thought they could discredit Jesus by getting Him out of the ivory tower and down into this messy, dirty, mixed-up world.

But what they didn't realize is that that had already happened! For in Jesus, the very Son of God had come down from Heaven and came into this messy, dirty, mixed-up world. Born in a dirty stable. Forced to flee for his life to Egypt. Living in a country town, the son of a tradesman. His disciples were not the best and the brightest. He hung out with and ate with tax collectors and sinners. He was rejected and chased out of His own hometown by those He grew up with. He was mocked and accused of being possessed

by a demon. **Does He know what its like to live in this messy, dirty, mixed-up world?** He was generous in the midst of those concerned only for themselves. He spoke the truth even among those who rejected it. He loved those who hated Him. And He forgave, even when He was rewarded for all that He did by death on the cross. **Does He know what its like to live in this messy, dirty, mixed-up world?** Yes, it's a tangled mess out there! A tangled mess woven by Satan, the master weaver of deception and lies. But it is exactly into this tangled mess that the Son of God came. And not by accident, but on purpose. And not just to show us how to live, but to show us how to die. And not just to show us how to die, but to show us how we will rise, with Him. And so in Christ, there is no "impossible situation," not even death. In Christ, all theology is practical, because He came down and made it so. Because God is not a God apart from us, up in some ivory tower called heaven, and barking down orders and instructions which really aren't practical – He is a God who is here and near, living for us and living in us.

And so with His answer to the Pharisees Jesus makes this very point, by reminding the Pharisees of an important Old Testament theology. ***"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? . . . Whose likeness"*** – [or literally: whose image] – ***"and inscription [are on the coin]?"*** Now, as soon as the Pharisees heard that word image, their ears would have perked up – because that was an important Old Testament word. First of all, because of God's prohibition against images, but also, and connected to that, the fact that God's image was not to be found in things, but in man. For as we hear from Genesis chapter 1: ***"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness . . . So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created Him; male and female He created them."*** . . . Now, the Pharisees knew about that image of God and that that image of God had been lost by man in sin, but what they did not understand was that it could not be restored through obedience to the Law. It could not be restored through questions of ***"is it lawful"*** and of always doing the right thing in a dirty, messy, mixed-up world. Rather, the image of God was again in man right before their very eyes! Because God had come down from heaven and was, in Jesus Christ, in this dirty, messy, mixed-up world, restoring sinful man through the forgiveness of sin. Not through our obedience, but through His obedience. Not through our efforts, but through His efforts. And not through our death, but through His death on the cross, imparted now to us in word, and water, and bread and wine. And so now, as we are joined with Christ, in His life, in His death, and in His resurrection, the image of God is being restored in us as we are being ***"conformed to the image of the Son."***

And far from being impractical, that is the most practical theology of all! For having been restored and recreated in the image of Christ, we now live as we are; we live in Him whose image we bear, ***"rendering to God what is God's"*** by offering ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God. But we do so as Christ did so, for indeed it

is Christ living and working in us. And so we offer ourselves not for ourselves, but for others. Being generous to a fault, forgiving the unforgivable, loving the unlovable, and even living at peace in this midst of this dirty, messy, mixed-up world. And asking no “buts” and making no exceptions, because there is really no clash between the life of faith and our life in the world, for our life of faith is lived in the world. And maybe in those ways I just mentioned, we will find ourselves, in a sense, dying with Christ. But now we can do so, for as ones who now again bear His image, as we accordingly **“render to God what is God’s,”** in Christ Jesus, it is not for ourselves who have been saved and rescued by Christ and now live in Him, it for the life of the world, as risen with Christ it is He who lives in us and through us for others.

Now, as long as we live in this world we will always live with the temptation to do as the Pharisees did – to separate our life of faith from this messy and entangling world. But as each seminarian must learn so each Christian must learn – we do not have all the answers, we live in a world that can so easily entangle, and we’re going to get dirty! But that is exactly where we see most clearly our life in Christ. For in Him we do not rise above the world, but exactly the opposite – for though we are not of the world, we are in the world. And through His abundant love and forgiveness, through His life-giving body and blood, we bear His image as we live in this world.

Or as we just sang:

**On my heart imprint your image, Blessed Jesus, king of grace,  
That life’s riches, cares, and pleasures Never may your work erase;  
Let the clear inscription be: Jesus, crucified for me,  
Is my life, my hope’s foundation, And my glory and salvation!**

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.