Pentecost 21, 2026; Matthew 22:15–22
Christ Church, Sparta, NC
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When I was a kid, I lived across the street from my elementary school. Many days after school, I would go home, change out of my school clothes and into my play clothes, have a snack, and then…run back to school. You see, the principal and I were "friends." I would go to his office and ask him all kinds of questions about the world and school. We talked about math and science, school after elementary school, and he often gave me riddles to try to solve. In hindsight, I think he was probably looking for things to keep me busy while he did his work, but as a good educator, he made opportunities for me to learn—I was clearly a curious kid. And the word puzzles he gave me—the riddles—often seemed at first, not to make much sense. "What always runs but never walks, often murmurs, never talks, has a bed but never sleeps, has a mouth but never eats?"

But eventually, I learned that there was usually a kind of key to unlocking their mystery. Sometimes you had to think less literally about the meaning of words. Sometimes you had to let go of a context you assumed. Sometimes you simply needed to think carefully about the logic of the language. So the thing that always runs but never walks, often murmurs, never talks, has a bed but never sleeps, has a mouth but never eats? <pause> it's *A river.* How can you leave a room with two legs and return with six? <pause> *Bring back a chair.* Groan worthy, I know!

In this morning's gospel reading, Jesus is confronted with a groan-worthy riddle, too. About…of all things…taxes. And we see him wiggling his way through the encounter by answering with, what seems to me, a frustrating kind of non-answer. At the same time, if we look a little more closely at the story, we start to see not only shrewd cleverness in Jesus's response—he is, after all, finding a way to un-riddle a very tricky situation— but in the wake of Jesus's answer, we, the readers, are confronted with astonishing patience and compassion—compassion that we don't always see in this story.

Let's look at the story a little more closely. This encounter with the Pharisees and the Herodians takes place toward the end of Jesus's ministry in the gospel of Matthew—he is already in Jerusalem and his arrest is immanent. He's flipped over money-changers' tables and dove sellers' cages in the temple courtyards and gotten just about any one's attention who will listen. And after a little cooling off, he returns to the temple to talk some more. Those in the temple are trying to figure out if this politically caustic, righteous living, people loving, guy is from God or just another flash-in-the-pan huckster. And in these conversations, the religious establishment has have been listening quite intently to Jesus and asking lots of questions. You see, Jesus has been doing his own riddling in these teachings, talking about the kingdom of heaven, the coming reign of

God—but in parables. If you were here last week, you'll remember the parable of the wedding banquet, and the week before that it was the parable of the wicked tenants, and the week before that the parable about the lazy son. So in a way, the Pharisees in this morning's segment of the story have been listening to Jesus's riddles for a while already. But Matthew tells us that they aren't just playing after school games in this conversation with Jesus—they are trying to catch him off guard, knowing just how easily one wrong answer would get him in trouble.

"Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" They ask. For us, in 21st century America, we might puzzle over the "lawful" part of this question. After all, our laws require taxes to be paid, end of story. But there's a little bit of historical context here that we should know about taxes and the law in Jesus's day. You see, Jerusalem, where the Jewish temple was, was a city under occupation—the Roman Empire controlled much of the infrastructure of the city. It wasn't outright run by Romans, daily life and Jewish ways of living it were still part of the picture. But, there were sometimes conflicts between ways that the Jewish people lived their lives, and the values of the Romans. One of those conflicts was taxes. (I know you're shocked).

Rome needed tax revenue to keep fresh water coming into the city, and to maintain the roads that created commerce, and to pay the military who were just a

little way outside the city. But Rome didn't want to seem like a pushy empire, so they put Herod, who was kind of Jewish and kind of Roman, in the position of king—and asked him to collect taxes as part of his kingly job.

Now, separate from the Romans, Jerusalem also had its own tax structure—and these taxes paid for the maintenance and upkeep of the temple and other important parts of Jewish communal life—caring for community members who were sick, dying, orphaned, impoverished. Feeding the hungry and sheltering the destitute. For Jerusalem, this tax was an expression of their faith—of their devotion to making God's mercy known in the world. Not a bad thing to participate in, but—Herod also collected these taxes.

So we have two kinds of taxes—taxes for God's work and taxes for the Roman Empire's work. And the Pharisees, who are probably fine with the taxes for God's work are not so thrilled about the empire's taxes. And the Herodians (another group who were loyal to Herod AND Rome) were probably just fine with the empire's taxes—because they got to skim a bit off the top. So what's this Jesus guy to do when he's asked, by the Pharisees, *in front of the Herodians*, whether God's law would include taxes to the emperor. It's a dangerous riddle because if he says "no, God wouldn't like it if we paid the emperor's taxes," the Herodians could try him for disloyalty to Rome. But, if he says "yes, go ahead and pay the emperor's taxes," he's contributing to Roman claims that the emperor is just as

powerful as God. Roman religious claims about the emperor—that is, that the emperor is the son of God.

So, we cheer when Jesus doesn't answer directly but rather asks for the kind of coin that one could pay the Roman tax with—a denarius, about a day's wages. You can almost imagine him flipping it over and over in his hand. And he asks his own kind of riddle. "Whose head and whose image is on this coin?" You see, in order to pay the Roman tax, you had to be in possession of a Roman coin. Just like you can't pay US taxes with European money, you couldn't pay Roman taxes with Jewish money. So once the coin is out in the open, everyone immediately sees the problem. The coin has the head of the emperor on it—and the words "pontif maxim"—the high priest. Some Roman coins at this time even said "divvi filii" The Son of God—the Roman emperor was considered nearly divine and that grated—no that upended Jewish notions—even our Christian notions—that God is not a human ruler. The Pharisees' question posed a rivalry between the Roman Emperor and the God of the Judeans (our God).

Jesus's answer is one we cheer on as clever, zingy, and just plain brilliant. Noting the emperor's picture, Jesus says, "give to Caesar what is Caesar's." In other words, this coin should mean so little to God's people, that giving it back to the one whose image lays claim to its value, is the right thing to do. God's creation provides all that is needed for God's people—no need to value images and tokens.

Jesus tells us, God, is more important than imperial power. God is not a rival to the empire. God is beyond such rivalries.

Yes! Check-Mate, Pharisees! Jesus just out theologized you! Brilliant! I love it when my guy wins a battle of wits! Jesus just wiggled his way out of the trap that the Pharisees and Herodians set for him.

As I cheer for Jesus, I also assume that the Pharisees and Herodians approached him with a snide tone, with a "bwhahahaha we're going to get you, Jesus" attitude. We assume they are villains in one of those old-fashioned melodramas. And we "booooo" them out of the story.

But wait. Are they really villians? This week as I turned the text over and over, I noticed, maybe for the first time, what *the Pharisees* say about Jesus. "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." And then, after Jesus answers them, Matthew says they "they were amazed; and they left him and went away." Wait a minute. Those who riddle with Jesus this morning admit to him that he is a truth-filled teacher. They reflect Jesus's fairness and sense of righteousness back to Jesus. And after their encounter they were "amazed." These are not the impressions of a group of people who were playing a game of "gotcha" for the sport of it.

These leaders recognized Jesus's way of "not showing partiality." Of finding ways to include the needs of both those who were caught in the imperial regime and those who were resistant to it. These leaders recognized that Jesus's patience not only unlocked their own riddle—but made a new one in return. Jesus, by not answering, forced them to see the folly in their question in the first place. Paying taxes was not a religious rivalry at all—because God has no rivals.

So often our patience for each other and for those we disagree with is frayed. Especially in the turmoil of the world around us—whether it's political turmoil or uncertainty about the future, or the turmoil of war, violence, addiction, and just old-fashioned meanness—especially in our current times, we so often quickly jump to villify the Pharisees or the Herodians, and we set Jesus up as the one who is against both of them—the one who is always, without fail on *our side* of a righteous argument.

But what would happen if we started to see Jesus as the one who patiently tends each side of our differences with compassion borne not of rivalry or pity—he doesn't correct or make the Pharisees and Herodians feel silly or stupid. Compassion not exercised in the form of triumph—Jesus doesn't do a victory dance once the Pharisees and Herodians leave the scene.

Give to Caesar what is caesar's does not comply with the claims of human authority—rather it makes another claim: God's power to draw us into God's own

economy is unrivaled in all of creation. Jesus, God's only Son, shows us this compassion in the most riddling places of our lives, giving us patience as we navigate the divides and boundaries of our world—the boundaries that so painfully divide us from each other. What would it mean to give our compassion to others—as a way of giving to God's beloved people what is, indeed, most clearly God's?