"What belongs to God?"

The Herodians are the people in charge of the area politics. They were placed by Rome. They keep the peace by making sure Rome is satiated and the territory of Jews they oversee are satiated. Neither are particular happy - Rome or the Jews - but the Herodians strike a balance. They make sure the taxes get paid, the roads are maintained, Rome is honoured. They make sure Rome doesn't enforce worshipping Caesar as god or the son of god; and he doesn't eradicate the people and send them off in slavery to the four winds. Herodian = Royal Status Quo.

Now the Pharisees are a social movement. They are not the priests and people in charge of the religious centre, the temple. That is the Sadducees. Pharisee literally means "Separated Ones" or Sacred Ones. A person decides that they wanted to be a Separate One, a Pharisee, and attempt to live life in a holy way. Jesus himself is likely a Pharisee. And we all know family feuds can get really ugly. Pharisee = Holiness movement

Now, an enemy of my enemy is my friend, yeah? The Herodians hate a third group called the Sadducees. They are the religious elite, and control the temple, and do this through birth right. They also used to hold king and high priest as one role - until the Herodians overthrew the priestly king. The Sadducees are the largest local threat to King Herod and his family. Both Herodians and the Sadducees are ruling through birth, and not through popularity. Herodians would like to see the Sadducees gone.
Sadducees = Clergy former royalty

Now the Pharisees ALSO hate the Sadducees. The Pharisees think the Sadducees are stuck in the past. They won't recognize the oral Torah, the Prophets, the Writings and the resurrection of the dead. They only acknowledge the written Torah. Sadducees believe in the importance of the rites, rituals, and temple to be in good relationship with God. The Pharisees teach God is everywhere and accessible to all. They'd like to see the Sadducees gone and the religion purified of Roman and royal influences.

Since they share a common enemy - the Sadducee priests - Pharisees and Herodians work together sometimes. We hear in Matthew today that some Pharisees see Jesus as an enemy. Jesus is blurring the line between sacred and mundane, which is very taboo for Pharisees. He lets his disciples work on the Sabbath, eat without washing their hands, and break other laws Moses set.

Meanwhile, the Herodians definitely dislike anyone from John the Baptist's movement. John told them to stop marrying and divorcing for political gain. And John said don't murder someone to take their spouse! (Both things Herod did.)

So for a moment, an uneasy truce between the Pharisees and the Herodians is struck. Jesus is incredibly popular among the people. Perhaps we can force him to take a side between us, the Herodians or the Pharisees. If Jesus stands with the Herodians, with Rome, the people will disown him and stop listening to his teachings. If he stands with the Pharisees, against Rome, then he is openly calling for rebellion and can be arrested. It's a win-win situation.

So they come to Jesus and set him up, "Rabbi, teacher, we know that you are sincere, and truthfully teach the way of God, and show deference to no one, for you don't play favourites. Tell us, then, what you think: Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"
Oooh what a devious trap!

Lawful has two meanings. Lawful - as in, following Roman laws. Or lawful - as in, following Moses' laws.
They even make sure everyone listening knows Jesus doesn't show deference - he doesn't obey - and he doesn't show partiality or have favourites. Whatever he says is going to break that moral armour.
This is one solid trap.

And Jesus sees through it. "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?" You people who say one thing and do another? You people who preach God's ways and then do Satan's work?

"Show me the coin used for the tax."
And they brought him a denarius - a Roman coin.

“Whose head is this and whose title?”
They answered, “Caesar’s.”

Then Jesus said to them, “Therefore, give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

What a devious answer to a devious question! As soon as you begin to answer "what belongs to God" and "what belongs to Caesar" you have gotten yourself in quicksand.
What belongs to Caesar? If you asked him, he'd say the world. Everything. People, taxes, land, honor, love, worship.

What belongs to God? Everything. God created everything, the cosmos, the animals, the land, people. God asks for us to respond back to God with honor, love, worship.

And yet we live in a complicated world where we often can't give 100% to God. The Pharisees would like that world. And yet, they carried with them Caesar's coin and participated in his economy. That is not giving God 100%. It is negotiating reality. They are choosing to live and negotiate rather than joining the zealots and dying in a fight against Rome.

We live in a complicated world. We know it is a sin to steal; it is wrong. But what if your child is starving? Is it still wrong to take bread to feed them? Is it more wrong that some have so much and some so little?

We live in a complicated world. Killing is wrong. And I cannot exist without killing. I ate plants today. That killed them. I ate animals today, that killed them. My taxes are paying for USA death squads; and also Canadian oil development - which will lead to more climate crisis deaths.

There is a TV show called "The Good Place." It is a fabulous ethical and theological exploration of morality and this very problem. How do we get to heaven, and how do we live into heaven, when whatever we do or don't do harms others? We're damned if we do and damned if we don't. Everything, including no action, hurts someone or something. The world is so messy and complicated.

Jesus gives a deceptively simple answer to a very complicated world. Just give to God what is God's own; and give to Caesar what is Caeser's own. But we each have to answer for ourselves what that entails.

Some answer all things are God's. They are challenged to give God all.
Some answer heart, mind, soul, strength are God's. They are challenged to give these. Some answer love is God's. They are challenged to love.

And what belongs to the forces outside of our control? What belongs to our governments locally and abroad? Everything? Then give everything.

Do they own time, money, and law? Then give them our time, our money, and obey the law. Do they own lip-service and lies? Give them lip-service and lies.

See how mischievous Jesus' answer is? He places it in our hands to negotiate our messy world and find a pathway through. He places a mirror in our hands and invites us to examine ourselves, our loyalties. He invites us to place blame, and honor, on the institutions around us.

In "The Good Place," eventually heaven realizes how messy the world is, and how impossible it is to die without having hurt others - most of whom we never know about or intended to hurt. So grace and mercy are extended to humanity. Purgatory is made, if you understand that term. People who die are invited to work on becoming more moral, more loving, more merciful in the afterlife and then to become mentors to others to help them improve too. Eventually, a person has worked through their faults and sins, become purified, sanctified, and are invited to enter Heaven when they so choose.

That grace and mercy is not just on TV. It is drawn from our sacred stories and scriptures. God knows how messy the world is. How morally gray. God asks us to choose, again and again, the better way. But God knows sometimes we are picking between two bad choices. God extends forgiveness to us. And invites us to choose the most loving choice - even when it isn't perfect.

After Jesus, the temple was destroyed. The Sadducees didn't exist anymore. And within a few generations, the Herodians didn't exist. The Pharisees developed into Rabbinic Judaism, and into the Jewish faith we know today. And they teach "choose life." They also developed into Jewish Christians, and into the Christian faith we know today. And we teach "choose love." These are not incompatible. They're often one and the same.

It is more loving to steal bread for your child than to let your child starve. Choose life for your child. It isn't perfect. But it is more loving. And it is lawful - as Moses said to choose life (Deut 30:19). Even as it breaks other commandments to not steal.

It can be more loving to pay your taxes, or not. You have to determine that. It can bring about more life to pay taxes and have safe roads and schools. Or it can end life by wars and climate change. You have to determine that. It is lawful to choose which causes more good.

Choose the better, the more loving, the more creation-affirming, life-giving, well-being of all - and choose it again and again in each situation. For every situation is different. And, trust God's understanding, love, and forgiveness cover the gap between your choice and the ideal.

In the words of Rev. Lizzie McManus-Dail: "God didn't make us to hate us."
God knows how messy the world is. And God wants us to do our best, and God will help with the rest. Amen!

Scripture Readings – Oct. 18, 2026 – for LCUCPC

Psalm 96:1-13 (VU 816)
Refrain: Sing a new song unto God who has done such marvellous things.

Sing to God a new song;
sing your praise, all the earth.
Sing and bless God's holy name, tell the glad news of salvation from day to day.
Declare God's glory among the nations, among all the peoples God's wonderful works.
For great is God and greatly to be praised, to be revered above all the gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but you, O God, made the heavens.
Honour and majesty attend you,
strength and beauty are in your sanctuary R.

Ascribe to God, you families of peoples, ascribe to God glory and strength.
Ascribe glory to God's name, bring an offering and enter God's courts.
Worship God in the beauty of holiness and let the whole earth stand in awe.
Say among the nations: It is God who reigns!
The world is made firm and cannot be shaken.
God judges the peoples in equity. R…

Let the heavens rejoice, and the earth be glad;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the fields exult, and all that is in them.
Then let all the trees of the forest sing for joy, for you come, O God, to judge the earth.
You shall judge the earth in righteousness, its peoples with your truth. R

Matthew 22:15-22 NRSV Ue
The Question about Paying Taxes
15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 So they sent their
disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "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. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or
not?" 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you
hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he
said to them, "Whose head is this and whose title?" 21 They answered, "Caesar's." Then he said
to them, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are
God's." 22 When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

May God's spirit shape our understanding of these words.
And may they awaken in our hearts

