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On Not Knowing What It Means, or What to Do

Exodus 33: 12-23
Matthew 22:15-22

Our gospel story opens with the arrival of representatives from two factions who have put their heads together and come up with a trick question for Jesus. The first group is the Pharisees, a religious party of committed laypeople with whom Jesus had a lot in common, even though they are portrayed in the New Testament as his most intractable enemies. For reasons scholars disagree about, but which may have something to do with the emperor setting himself up as a divine son of god, the devout Pharisees were resistant to paying the head tax to their Roman overlords. The other faction, the Herodians, advocated pragmatic collaboration with the Romans. They get only one other mention in the gospels, and we don't know much about them; but their name implies sympathy with a line of violent and irreligious puppet kings who ruled in Judea at Rome's behest, and who

were generally despised by pious, nationalistic Jews. That these two opposing factions are in cahoots gives a whole new meaning to the term 'strange bedfellows'.

They begin their interview with Jesus by lathering on the flattery: 'You are so sincere, Jesus; you truly teach God's way...' Jesus is thinking, 'Blah, blah, blah!' Then they pop the trick question. "Is it lawful to pay the tax to the emperor?"

It doesn't take a mind reader to figure out what they are up to. Jesus knows that if he says, 'Yes, we should pay the tax,' the popular base that resonates with his anti-imperial preaching will complain that he flip-flopped and gave into the special interests; in the next election they'll vote for Ralph Nader. If he says, 'No, we must not pay the tax,' Bill O'Reilly will label him a dupe of the radical peace groups, and the FBI will step up the monitoring of his library books. Give one answer, and your followers abandon you. Give the other, and the authorities have proof that you are a garden variety insurrectionist and will deal with you by the usual means. This Gruesome Twosome appears to have Jesus over a barrel.

Jesus asks to see the denarius used to pay the tax. He inquires about the image stamped on the little silver coin. They tell him that it is the emperor's. Jesus says, "Well, then give him what is his, and give God what is God's."

Apparently this is a great answer. We are told that the Pharisees and Herodians heard it and went away amazed. But why? What were they amazed about? What did they make of Jesus' reply? What did it mean exactly? What did they report to the party bosses back at headquarters? Had they won? Had they lost? Is it clear to you what actually happened? It isn't clear to me!

Once at an ordination I was participating in, a famous preacher gave a mesmerizing sermon that left everyone in the sanctuary breathless. Afterwards, in the reception line, a couple of colleagues sidled up to me and said, "Wasn't she *amazing*?" I allowed that yes, indeed, she was. Then one of them asked, "But what did she *say*, exactly?" I had absolutely no idea, and no one else did either, as it turned out. A great turn of phrase is worth a lot in my book, but it doesn't always clarify things.

Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's' It's got a nice Zen-ish ring to it. But what does it *mean*?

And what precisely are we to *do* with it?

Some theologians think that Jesus was talking about two distinct realms of human life—the secular and religious, or maybe what we call church and state—and telling us that we are citizens of both, one foot planted in each. God sanctions earthly government and requires our loyalty to it as long as it is godly; but when it is ungodly, or when it demands from us the absolute allegiance that pertains only to God, we must always give precedence to God's claim on us, or risk idolatry.

Now, if that is what Jesus meant, it seems simple enough. If you think, for example, that the war in Iraq is an unjust imperial project; and if, now that it has taken more than 2,000 American lives, untold Iraqi lives, and is costing billions a day, you are more persuaded than ever in your Christian conscience and in your judgment as a citizen that it is just plain wrong, then you are should not fork over the taxes that pay for it. Right?

But (some of you may observe), taxes also pay for public education and other things that are needed and good, and I would not want to harm those interests by refusing to pay. Others might wonder, What will happen to me if I withhold my taxes? And wouldn't it be a futile gesture? Would it really stop the war? And still others of us would say, I can't think about this right now, I have a meeting.

Give to Caesar what belongs to him, and to God what belongs to God.

What does that *mean*? What are we supposed to *do*, exactly?

Another line of interpretation says that when Jesus told the ambassadors to give to Caesar what belongs to him, he was being facetious: the overarching truth is that *nothing* belongs to Caesar.

Everything is *God's*, and claims by the Empire to possess and control its subjects with ultimacy—claims implicit in the coin's inscription identifying Caesar as divine—are simply blasphemous. This interpretation has given rise to various and sometimes contradictory approaches to Christian civic life. One place to which it has led is to withdrawal from the world. This is the separatist, or sectarian, impulse

exemplified by the internal exile that evangelical Christians in this country once imposed on themselves—before they came to love power, that is—as the most faithful way to be a disciple in a lost and corrupt world. It is still what many religious home-schoolers believe. Minimize your involvement lest you be tainted by the idolatry of the State.

But even sectarians make compromises. Maybe you don't run for the local town council or school board, maybe you don't even vote, but if the government should ever move to take away your church's tax exemption, I'm guessing you will get on the horn and call your Congressperson, or hire an attorney and use the courts for redress.

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In most cases, using this passage to describe a reasoned approach to the question of the Christian citizen's relationship to government ends up generating all sorts of complications. It's no wonder that another typical line of interpretation gives up trying to relate this story to

politics, citizenship and government altogether. Instead the story becomes a stewardship message: Give Uncle Sam what belongs to Uncle Sam, it says, but don't forget also to give St. Polycarp by the Pool what belongs to St Polycarp by the Pool—pay your dues to your country and to your church! Render unto Caesar...

So, what did Jesus *really* mean?

I have no idea. And I doubt that all the Pharisees and Herodians back at headquarters did either. Whatever they understood by it, it did not deter them from further confrontation with Jesus; it did not ensure him the lasting loyalty of his followers; it did not win him the mercy of Pontius Pilate. Whatever he meant, he did not mean to save his life.

Now, we all know that this is not the only place in the scriptures where Jesus is deliberately cryptic. It isn't the only story in which we hear that people walk away amazed, even though we are not quite sure what that amazement was about. It's not the only instance in which the theory we spin from what Jesus says seems at first straightforward, and then turns out not to be. Not the first time that we are left to work

out the implications for ourselves, and to discover the unsettling truth that faithful disciples can and do work them out in different and even conflicting ways. It isn't the only example of Jesus' resistance to cooptation and manipulation. And I think that it is in elusive moments like this one that Jesus, whom Christians believe is 'God with us', most reminds me of the God who is *not* with us in any ordinary sense, but is the Hidden One whose ways are not our ways, and who is under no compulsion to explain or justify anything at all to mortals.

This is the part of God's biblical character that seems most forbidding to us, this absence, this stubborn silence. Many of us are impatient with Zen-like utterances. We don't want a God that slips eternally through our fingers. But in some ways it is only this hidden, cryptic, elusive and unknown God that you can really trust to have your best interests at heart. When by divine reticence God lets us know that God is not who we think God is; when God won't give us a straight answer to a simple question; when God amazes us without letting on what it's really all about, God is doing human beings a huge favor.

Like Moses, we keep asking for absolute clarity. We keep demanding

the whole truth about God. We want the picture sketched out. Put the instruction manual in our hand, we pray—tell us plainly who you are, what you want, and how, precisely, we should regulate our social, political and ecclesial lives according to the gospel. But the saving grace that we are granted instead of all this clarity is simply that we are finite, partial and contingent. We want it all, but the gift and blessing we are given is to see only a little light, as we peer out from the cleft in the rock where God has thoughtfully stashed us.

Never in this life to know everything is not a cause for sadness and frustration. Not to know everything is a cause for gratitude and praise, because, having glimpsed only God's back, we are thus shielded not only from that blast of full frontal glory we could not possibly endure, but we are shielded also from pride—and from the violence and contempt that always go with it. If we can be content to see only snatches of truth, if we can resist claiming more about God's being and God's intentions than any finite human can truly claim, we may, by God's grace, be less likely to set ourselves up in God's place, with all the dreadful, familiar consequences that such self-delusion always entails.

I once had student at the seminary who had a great crisis of faith and left school, abandoning all thought of a pastoral calling. He had many reasons why this was a good thing to do. Mostly it was a move prompted by a need for intellectual, theological and moral purity. He did not think he could be a pastor with complete integrity; he had mixed motives, his ego was untamed, he wasn't sure that he had enough faith, or faith of the right quality. His departure seemed a sad waste to me, since no one accepts this calling with complete integrity, without a mixed motive or a doubtful cloud on the horizon of the heart. If complete personal coherence were a qualification for ministry, there would be no one serving. But one thing he said has stayed with me, and it challenges me all the time. He said, 'I don't know how I can get up and preach to people every Sunday as if I knew what God wants. I am afraid to speak for God, as if I actually knew what God is saying.'

Today in our nation a large number of Christian voices are not, apparently, the least bit perplexed or stymied by Jesus or by the God of Jesus. They seem to know precisely what God means and exactly how to practice what Jesus preaches. They are often invited to tell our pluralistic nation all about it on cable TV. They are happy to do so. You have seen and heard them. They seem unafraid that they may be

speaking temeriously, presuming too much, overreaching. Our president is also serenely confident, at least in public, about his own knowledge of God's ways and will. No shadow of doubt or complexity haunts him.

I do not wish to judge anyone's faith. I am in fact eager for the good news about what God is doing for the world in Christ to be heard in the street and on the airwaves. I myself hope always to speak with joyful confidence about the good news, never being ashamed of the gospel. But I also pray every day, for me and for all of us, that I might be protected from myself, from my prideful need to know it all, my anxious need to control even God, my presumption and overreaching in speaking in God's stead—and from the violence and contempt that lurk in the shadow of such self-delusion.

I want to be protected from myself by the very God who refuses so wisely to be fully known, so that from the cleft in the rock where the hidden God has so compassionately hidden me, I may tell the amazing story of what I do not know as well as the wondrous story of what I do know—and do so with humility of speech, with modesty of exhortation, with joy in my human limitations too many to count, and with a reverent

and awe-struck heart before the One whose Holy Name cannot be pronounced, but whose seen and unseen love is everlasting. I invite us all to the do the same.