

Twenty-First Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): ~~“Caesar Is Lord; Jesus Is Lord!”~~

Matthew 22: 15-22

October 17-18, 2026

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I checked my purse and I’m carrying around 4 presidents. Probably a lot of you are carrying them around, too. I’m wondering if any of our youth can figure out what I’m talking about. If not, can anyone out there help the kids fill out their sermon notes by shedding light on this mystery? Where do pictures of famous Americans show up in our purse or wallet?

- Abraham Lincoln is on this penny and on this five dollar bill.
- Thomas Jefferson is on this nickel.
- Franklin Delano Roosevelt is on this dime.
- George Washington is on this quarter and this one dollar bill.

Somewhere at home I have a silver dollar with John F. Kennedy on it. I also have a twenty dollar bill with Andrew Jackson on it. We almost always wait until our presidents are dead before honoring them by putting their images on money. In Jesus’ time, though, the Romans didn’t wait to put Caesar’s head on coins. Caesar was the title of the emperor of the Roman Empire. An emperor named Tiberius Caesar was alive and well when Jesus walked this earth and coins were minted with his image.

Today’s Gospel takes place at the beginning of Holy Week. Some religious leaders, enemies of Jesus, are trying to trip Him up with a hard question, because they’re very upset with Jesus. A day earlier He had come into the outer part of the Temple, called the Court of Gentiles, where non-Jewish people were allowed to be, and where vendors sold animals to be sacrificed in the temple: cows and bulls, sheep and lambs, goats, doves and pigeons. You can bet it was noisy and messy, like at a circus. Lots of money was changing hands there. Before people could buy the animals for the priests to sacrifice to God they had to exchange their everyday money for temple money. That’s because everyday money had the emperor’s picture on it and Jewish law said **no images** of anyone could be in the temple, especially pictures of someone who thought **he** was a god, instead of worshiping the one true God.

Jesus was usually a calm, gentle person, but on that day He shouted,

‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’

but you are making it a den of robbers.”

Imagine the tables in Fellowship Hall or in your school cafeteria covered with coins and someone coming in and overturning all those tables and even the chairs on which people had been sitting! There'd be a lot of coins rolling everywhere, a big ruckus, people screaming, animals bleating and snorting and mooing, maybe stampeding out of fright. People were not happy that there was a big mess to clean up and that business shut down early for the day. Plus the coordinators of all that buying and selling knew that Jesus was criticizing and even condemning them and their practices. They were not happy with Him. They wanted to embarrass Him and get Him in trouble with other powers-that-be. They wanted to get rid of Him for good.

So they set Him up with this hard question: *"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"* (Matt. 22:17b) They figured if Jesus said Yes, the Jewish people who saw Caesar as a cruel and unjust tyrant, who hated the Romans and wanted to revolt against Roman rule would be upset with Jesus for saying, "Sure, go ahead and fork over your money to the overlords." They figured if Jesus said No, He'd be in trouble with the Romans themselves and the men who were collecting taxes for them. He'd also be in trouble with the Jewish leaders who wanted to make nice with Rome and keep peace with Rome so Rome didn't treat them even **more** harshly, coming down hard on the Temple and on Jerusalem. (About 40 years later Rome **did** destroy the Temple and lay waste to Jerusalem in response to a Jewish uprising.)

Jesus was very clever, though. He recognized the trap they'd set for Him, and instead of answering their question He demanded:

"Show me the coin used for the tax."

One of them pulled out of his pocket a coin called a denarius. Jesus pointed at it and asked:

"Whose head is this and whose title?" 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." (Matt. 22:20-21)

A simpler way of saying that is, *"...give Caesar what is his, and give God what is his." (The Message)*

Jesus is saying, it's ok to pay taxes and to obey laws, to do what the government requires. But what's **most** important is obeying **God** and doing what **God** requires. If there's a conflict between the two, God's law wins out.

For instance, after Jesus died and rose and ascended to Heaven, the first ones who believed that He is God's Son, believed that He is our Savior, were persecuted by Rome. Sometimes they weren't just **persecuted**, they were **executed**. A whole series of Roman emperors said they were god. Remember how one of the gifts the Magi brought to the Baby Jesus was incense? That's

because Jesus is God. In some churches incense is still burned to honor God. It's why we sometimes say or sing, "Let our prayers rise before you as incense." (Psalm 141:2) Caesar demanded that people burn incense before an image of Caesar and say, "Caesar is lord." Christians refused. Because Caesar is **not** Lord. **Jesus** is Lord. Many of them chose to die (some of them thrown to the lions in the Coliseum) rather than burn incense to Caesar, rather than lie and deny Jesus by saying, "Caesar is lord." Because **Jesus** is Lord.

We'll pray the Apostles Creed after we sing our hymn of the day. It's important enough that all our confirmands memorize it. But there's an earlier and much shorter creed, just 3 words: "**Jesus** is Lord." That says it all for us. Jesus is most important because Jesus is God's Son who died and rose for us. Obeying Jesus is most important because our ultimate allegiance, our highest loyalty is to **God**. At times in history there have been governments that told people to do something that was wrong. People of faith resisted and refused, knowing that doing what God expects and commands is most important and overrides any other authority, even authorities that have the power to punish us. That takes faith. That takes courage.

In our own country in every era we've had people of faith who've risen up to say that certain laws are unjust and certain practices are wrong. For instance, enslaving other human beings was once legal in our country. A man named Henry David Thoreau was an abolitionist, meaning he believed slavery was wrong and he fought against it. Earlier than the Civil War in the 1860's our country waged the Mexican-American War which Thoreau believed was just a bid to add more slaves and slave states to the United States. He decided he wouldn't pay his taxes in protest. After 3 years of Thoreau's refusal to pay his taxes, the constable, who was also the tax collector asked him to pay up, and even volunteered to give him the money if he didn't have enough. Thoreau said he was refusing to pay as a matter of conscience, and that's when the constable threw him into jail in Concord, MA. That night some lady wearing a veil to hide her identity showed up and paid the taxes Thoreau owed. The next morning the constable told Thoreau his debt was paid and he was being released from jail. Thoreau said, "**I** didn't pay my taxes and I don't **intend** to pay them, so keep me here." The constable had to forcibly remove him from the jail and send him back home.

There's a story that while Thoreau was in prison his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson came to visit him and asked in a patronizing voice, "Henry, what are you doing in there?" like he thought his friend was being silly. Thoreau's response was, "Ralph, what are you doing out there?" In other words, "If you also believe that slavery is wrong, then you should follow your conscience, protest, and join me in here."

Money has a lot of good uses. As a matter of fact, I'm going to put **this** money into the offering plate when one of our ushers brings it around. The money given to our faith family is really money given to God to become ministry, to help us **spread** Good News and **be** good news in this world. We own money, but money doesn't own us. God owns us. We are free to give our money away to good and holy causes. Giving money away will never make me poor. What would make me poor would be hoarding my blessings and refusing to share them with others.

Abraham Lincoln, who appears on our pennies for a little while longer and who will still appear on our one dollar bill, was at a reception celebrating a Union victory in the Civil War, when a pastor approached him and gushed, "President, isn't it a great thing that God is on our side?" Mr. Lincoln's answer was, "Preacher, I'm concerned that we're on God's side." That should be our concern, too, that we are on God's side: as individuals, as a community of faith, as a nation. Here's a wise and seasonally relevant reflection I found on today's Gospel:

In navigating the complex landscape of elections, the wisdom of Jesus' response to the Pharisees may be helpful. Just as Jesus astutely discerned the intent behind the question and offered a nuanced answer, we too are called to approach political engagement with thoughtfulness and discernment. We must balance our civic responsibilities with our higher calling as followers of Christ, recognizing that while we participate in earthly systems, our ultimate allegiance is to God's kingdom. This passage challenges us to be engaged citizens who contribute to the common good, while also maintaining a prophetic voice that **speaks truth to power** and **advocates for justice –values that reflect God's love for the world.**¹

¹*Sundays and Seasons, 2025-2026* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2025), p. 265.

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