

23rd Sunday after the Trinity

Phil. 3: 17-21; 4: 1-3

Mt. 22: 15-21

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

The great theoretical physicist, Albert Einstein once commented, “Things should be made as simple as possible, BUT, not simpler” (that is, not simpler than is possible). When it comes to solving problems in life we mostly prefer to have choices where the selection to be made is obvious, easy, and does not tax our imaginations, decisions, or moral commitments. We might say, “less stress is best”. There is nothing easier or more comfortable than living in a simplistic world, where things are black and white. This is bit like the old western movies from my childhood, where you knew exactly who the good guys were, if nothing else, from the color hats they wore. Good would win out in the end, evil would be defeated and the all would be right with the world, at least until next Saturday’s sequel. Is it any wonder we become nostalgic for the past and for a time in our lives when things seemed to make sense and be clear; when we appeared to be “off the hook” for having to make tough decisions?

Our experience in this life is however, different, and we are people who know that life is marked by contradictions and ambiguity at least as often as it is by simplicity. I remember very well an incident when I was in elementary school that has been hard to forget. In those times we took great delight in a variety of holidays and our teachers gave us ample opportunities to play and participate. As I recall I must have been in the 2nd grade, and St. Valentine’s Day was the next to be celebrated. Everyone was energized with making little boxes into which other children would slip cards or notes, and we were all excited to see who would receive the most or the largest valentines. Of course, receiving too many from girls was sure to pay dividends on the playground in the form of harassment by the other boys. I suppose our testosterone had not kicked in just yet. As the day approached my mother assisted in getting the cards ready, and had a role of all the children in the class. I informed her that I had my own list of persons to receive one from me. To her great compassion and credit she informed me that I would either give one to every classmate, or I would give none at all. I might well like some more than others, but no one would be left out, so I acceded to her demands and took them to school. Later that day another young boy in our class came up to speak to me. He was from a poor family and not one of the “popular” kids in school. He came up to me, and with tears in his eyes, thanked me for his valentine. And then he added, “it was the only one that I got”. The embarrassing truth is that had it been my mother’s insistence and not my own action that brought him that card. How easy it is to make simple decisions about others or about life in general when we make the world a black and white place, and when we succumb to the pressure to take the easy way out. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once commented, “It is infinitely easier to suffer in obedience to human expectations, than in the freedom of our own responsibility”.

The older we become the more ambiguous and challenging the decisions are. In the days following 9-11 we found ourselves faced with incredibly tough choices in terms of how to deal with our fears about the loss of security. We are a nation of people that pride ourselves on living as free individuals. We want to be able to go where we want to go when we want to do so. We want the freedom to make our own choices, although we are not so sure we want to extend that same openness to everyone else. We have found ourselves in a national debate about this. If we want to exercise this freedom, then we are faced with having to accept a certain degree of

uncertainty and maybe, less security. And if we want to be secure and protected then we have to relinquish the ease with which we come and go. Go through any airport security system now and see how it has changed in the past few years. There is an inherent tension between freedom on the one hand, and security on the other.

How is it that we Christians are to face the “fuzziness” of life in this day and age? What principle(s) guide us to live faithfully with God and one another in a world filled with ambiguity and uncertainty? These are not mere academic questions, but are very real and cause us to struggle. In addressing a graduation class from a local university recently, a speaker told the senior class, “the question facing you will not be so much how you will earn your bread and sustain yourselves, but how you live with gaining your resources for pleasure and leisure, while so many in our world will go to bed hungry”.

The Gospel lesson today is a confrontation between Jesus and a set of persons hoping to get him to denounce citizenship in the Roman Empire. To do so will put him at odds with the prevailing political system, and make him guilty of treason. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar”, is the way the question is put. But, it is really a question about personal responsibility for one living in this world as a person belonging to God. The tension in the inquiry is clearly present. How are any of us, baptized into Christ, to live in this community where so many conflicting demands are made upon us? For those who want black and white answers the assumption is that it must come down to one or the other. They would like to make things simpler than is possible. Jesus takes a coin, asks whose image is on it. The answer is obvious—it is Caesar's, the political power house of the day. Jesus' response is deceptively simple—Render to Caesar what is his, and to God what is His. In short, we are citizens of two worlds, at least on the surface of things, and we are called to live within that tension, but to make careful decisions and actions based on discernment. The real “bear” in this response is that we have to decide what is rightfully God's and what belongs elsewhere. Notice that Jesus asks the question about an “**IMAGE**”. This is not mere reference to the imprint on a coin. To bear an image is to carry the stamp of ownership. It marks the object as not being its own. This harkens back to Genesis where humanity is created “in the image of God”, that is we bear the mark of ownership, and also back to the covenant with Abraham. For a Christian to live in this world means to take seriously that everything belongs to God. In a very real sense the way we relate to the political world, as responsible citizens is a mark of our discerning God's ownership of this world. The concept of the separation of Church and State has to do with each fulfilling its proper function in life so that neither one attempts to do what the other alone can do. But for the Christian they are not two separate and equal realms—because both are God's. I suspect that often the real difficulty is not so much in knowing what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God, but in summoning the courage to decide and live by what we already know. That is where our faith places us—taking the simple and clear reality that God owns the whole person and as His we are called to discern when, where, and how we will live out that reality, whether in support of or in opposition to Caesar. St. Matthew does one other thing by telling this story as he does. He shows us the hypocrisy of the questioners. In doing so he leaves us with a warning. The hypocrite here is the one who deceives himself into making the world so black and white that he is unable to see that everything belongs to God—including us—and thus he loses what is most precious. May we be delivered from such short-sightedness. Amen+