

For Private Distribution Only

The interchange related in today’s scripture reading occurs toward the beginning of Holy Week. It’s only Tuesday, and already it’s been a very full week. In Matthew’s version, Jesus had entered Jerusalem triumphantly on Monday and made his way to the temple to cleanse it of abuse. On Tuesday, Jesus cursed the fig tree, was questioned about his authority, offered three parables with warnings to people who assumed they were God’s favorites. Then he was challenged about whether to pay taxes, questioned about the resurrection of the dead, challenged about the greatest commandment, and discussed the nature of the messiah. Finally, Jesus gave a long discourse in which he denounced religious leaders, lamented over Jerusalem, predicted the temple’s destruction, listed signs of the end times, offered some more parables, and told of the final judgment. Whew! His biggest accomplishment of the day? Putting the religious leaders in their place. So thoroughly did Jesus overwhelm his verbal adversaries and denounce the temple leadership that by Wednesday they began plotting to arrest and kill this clever, bothersome prophet.

But let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves. It’s only Tuesday, and the Pharisees are attempting to flatter and entrap Jesus in the issue of paying taxes to their adversary and occupier, the Roman Empire. Not only are the Pharisees opposed to occupation by Caesar’s government, but they have issues with its coinage, which single-handedly breaks two of the ten commandments. On the *denarius* was an image of the emperor’s head and beneath it the inscription, “Son of God.”

On just one little coin was a graven image and worship of gods other than Yahweh. So we know where the Pharisees stood on the issue of handing over a *denarius* to Rome. They weren't even supposed to carry the idolatrous coins in their pockets!

But the Pharisees up the ante by inviting the Herodians to join in the fun with Jesus. Normally considered political adversaries, the Herodians were Jews indebted to Rome for keeping their King Herod in puppet power. The Pharisees have knowingly placed Jesus in a “darned if you do, darned if you don't” situation. Whether or not he authorized paying Caesar his taxes, someone was going to be upset. There was no way out of this one...or so the Pharisees thought. But clearly they underestimated Jesus' keen mind and verbal prowess. We're told that Jesus' answer *amazed* his adversaries. I have to believe it also left them confusedly scratching their heads, which is probably why they departed shortly thereafter. “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's,” Jesus responds.

Some have assumed his intent here was to draw a line in the sand between government and religion--in our terms, church and state. The secular coins bearing his face are Caesar's. The sacred realm is God's... Yet it's not quite that simple. For one thing, people of Jesus' time would have seen absolutely no distinction between religion and the rest of their lives. The concept of religion as a separate category is a thoroughly modern concept. For another, surely Jesus believed that absolutely everything belonged to his and our heavenly parent and creator, God. So could that reverse the meaning of Jesus' response? Are we to refrain from paying the I.R.S. and make our checks payable to God instead? I'm not entirely sure. What do YOU think? The gospels don't contain any specific accounts of Jesus dutifully submitting his taxes. But probably to get anywhere in Palestine he would have had to pay some toll taxes to Rome.

That, of course, is speculation. What we DO know for sure is that Jesus was not afraid to engage in acts of civil disobedience when he saw fit. In fact, just a few verses and one day earlier in Matthew he had done so, first leading a motley parade into Jerusalem atop a donkey and later angrily knocked over the money changers' tables in the temple...

If there were a formal currency in God's realm, what do you think it would be? Certainly not gold or silver or even paper. But how about currencies like peace, love, grace, mercy, compassion, healing, beauty, wisdom, and justice? If we're looking for a physical manifestation of this divine money, we might want to search for something that, like the Roman coin, bears the face of its source. In this case, we need look no further than each of us, the children of God. All of our faces bear the unmistakable imprint of God.

I recently posed the following question to a group of fellow clergy people: "Based on this text, do you think we would have Jesus' blessing to withhold our tax dollars because we don't want our money to continue to support military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, wars which have been killing children of God for ten years?" They obviously weren't prepared to go there and just looked back at me blankly. --You know, it's hard for the UCC pastor in almost any ecumenical group not to stick out like a sore thumb.--☺ That said, I'm not necessarily authorizing you to snub the IRS either. Our treasurer Penny Phelps can confirm that the IRS is getting a portion of my paycheck. But I do think that Jesus' response is just ambiguous enough to put the onus on us to carefully consider our political and financial decisions and commitments on a case by case basis. And I think his own examples of civil disobedience may point the way toward a faithful, *biblically* lawful protest strategy. Yes, it ultimately got him crucified. But it also sparked a

movement which lives on to this day and has the potential to be every bit as edgy and subversive when necessary.

I imagine many of you have been following the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations and the many offshoots it and the Arab Spring movement have inspired around the globe, the closest to us being in Traverse City, Ann Arbor and Chicago. Some have criticized the protesters for being disorganized and unfocused in their goals. I took the time to read their “Declaration of the Occupation of New York City” this past week, and it seemed pretty straightforward to me. The first two paragraphs of that document read as follows:

As we gather together in solidarity to express a feeling of mass injustice, we must not lose sight of what brought us together. We write so that all people who feel wronged by the corporate forces of the world can know that we are your allies.

As one people, united, we acknowledge the reality: that the future of the human race requires the cooperation of its members; that our system must protect our rights, and upon corruption of that system, it is up to the individuals to protect their own rights, and those of their neighbors; that a democratic government derives its just power from the people, but corporations do not seek consent to extract wealth from the people and the Earth; and that no true democracy is attainable when the process is determined by economic power. We come to you at a time when corporations, which place profit over people, self-interest over justice, and oppression over equality, run our governments. We have peaceably assembled here, as is our right, to let these facts be known.¹

It then goes on to list twenty-one examples of corporate wrongs they believe have been committed against average Americans and, more generally, against creation. True, those alleged transgressions are all over the map: from illegal foreclosures to workplace discrimination to animal testing and beyond. The Wall Street demonstrators are not going after a single target company or politician, but naming the systemic, corporate evil that exists in our time... This isn't really so far off base from what Jesus did in *his* time. There obviously was no global economy at that time. No far-reaching EU or United States. And certainly no Internet and cell

¹ <http://occupywallst.org/forum/first-official-release-from-occupy-wall-street/>.

phone based social media! So venturing to Jerusalem to overturn tables and parody Roman rule in a parade would have been the 1st Century Palestinian equivalent of Occupy Wall Street.

Though Occupy Wall Street may not have initially arisen in a specifically religious context, there are reports of a clearly religious presence there. According to the Washington Post and other media outlets, a group of dozens of self-named "Protest Chaplains" traveled from Boston to join the movement. Donned in white-robos they entered the park singing spirituals and blessing the demonstrators while holding handmade Christian crosses and signs reading "Blessed are the poor." A loose group of mostly Christian students, seminarians, and laypeople they organized through Facebook and ventured to the City to express support for the movement through their faith. Said one of their organizers, "We had a real desire for there to be a specifically Christian voice of protest.... Advocating for the 99 percent is the same vision for the world that Christianity has, only rendered into secular language." ...At least one minister of our own denomination has gotten involved. Last Saturday the Rev. Donna Schaper marched with an interfaith group of fifty local religious leaders, who were joined in their commitment to each faith's version of the Golden Rule. They carried a handmade golden calf, which bore a striking resemblance to the New York Stock Exchange's iconic bull statue. "We think Wall Street has become idolatrous," Schaper is quoted as saying. "I'm not saying God is against the people of Wall Street, but I think God is sick of Wall Street taking more than they deserve." Harvard's Muslim chaplain said his participation was a natural extension of his religious commitment. While a Divinity School student commented, "...it's very important for me, as a Jewish person, to be out here supporting this. Your identity as a protester and your identity as a Jew shouldn't have to be mutually exclusive... As a spiritual people, we have a great responsibility. And if this

can be a shofar blast to the world, to recognize the spiritual reality that's around us, telling us to do less in terms of greed and more in terms of people, that would be good."²

Even today, with a constitution mandating the separation of church and state, it would seem that the lines delineating our spiritual and political sides can be a bit blurry at times. To tie this back to the Children's Sabbath we have observed during this service, I'd like to share some statistics gathered by the Children's Defense Fund: Did you know that each day in America, 78 babies die before their first birthdays? 2224 babies are born without health insurance? 2583 babies are born into poverty? And 2479 of God's children are confirmed as abused or neglected? Undoubtedly much of the substance of these tragic figures can be traced back—directly or indirectly—to unemployment, the high cost of health insurance, and other economic factors rooted in corporate greed.

These numbers call on us to fight to preserve and extend the safety nets that seek to protect these little ones, the least and most vulnerable among us. Which could mean talking back to the powers that be--Wall Street, Washington, or Lansing—toppling the proverbial moneychangers' tables and asking them all to spend more time dealing in what we know to be *God's* currency: peace, love, grace, mercy, compassion, healing, wisdom, and justice

With the power of numbers and the volume turned up so loud, Caesar seems finally to be listening. So let us speak our truths as citizens *and* Christians and encourage Caesar to act for the good of all realms.

Amen.

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/10/occupy-wall-street-protest-chaplains_n_1004112.html.