

I SEE YOU

MATTHEW 22:15-22
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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Usually, I am fairly methodical in how I approach my sermons (if a bit disorganized in the preparation). The texts and themes are mapped out well in advance and I stick to them quite strictly.

I have never been the sort of preacher who kind of just waits for the inspiration to strike, hopefully sometime before Sunday morning around 11:20 am ☺.

But sometimes, I think it's important to allow God to steer me off course a little, to allow the comments of others in our community, the events of the week, and whatever else might be going on to redirect what I had in mind when I mapped things out.

This is one of those Sundays. The direction this sermon ended up taking was not really what I envisioned earlier in the week.

It will not be anything like a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the text from Matthew we just heard, although I will refer to it.

It will involve a bit more storytelling that I originally anticipated.

It will probably not reflect the sermon title in your bulletin very well. In fact, last night I changed the title to "I See You," for reasons that I hope will become clear as we go (if you are a reader of my blog, parts of this sermon will seem quite familiar).

I think sermons that are mapped out well in advance and built on rational arguments and logical structures are good, but it's not the only way to preach.

Last night when I was having a panic attack that this wasn't "enough" for a "real" sermon, I took comfort from the fact that there was once a carpenter from Nazareth that thought it was acceptable to teach using bits of Scripture and stories, too ☺.

Let's start with Matthew...

We are back in the middle of a long dialogue, a long confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel.

Jesus has been putting them in their place with stories about vineyards and banquets, showing them that they had drifted a long ways from being a people who lived lives of love and fruitfulness.

Now, the Pharisees are joined by the Herodians—a group of influential Jews who were known as collaborators with Rome because they supported the emperor's puppet King Herod. Ordinarily the Pharisees couldn't stand the Herodians because they saw them as traitors; but when it comes to resisting Jesus? Well, then everyone in!

So, in this context, a question is posed to Jesus: *Should we pay the tax to Rome or not?*

Jesus seems to be stuck between two equally distasteful answers.

If he says, "Yes, you can be faithful to God *and* pay the tax," he will be guilty, in the Pharisees eyes, of violating two of the Ten Commandments. The Roman coin—a denarius—bore an image of the Caesar on it along with the inscription, "Caesar is Lord." Paying the tax with this coin would, therefore, violate both the commandment to have no other gods before Yahweh, as well as the prohibition against making images of gods (Ex. 20:1-4).

If he says, "No, being a faithful Jew, being faithful to God means *refusing* to pay the tax," he will be exposing himself as a revolutionary, a threat against the empire. And we know what happened to revolutionaries in first century Rome. They were executed very publicly, often on crosses by the side of the road, as a deterrent to others.

So, Jesus seems stuck. No matter which way he answers, the Pharisees have him.

This image of being stuck in a crowd and faced with two equally unpleasant options brought to mind a story (on a *far* different scale) from my own childhood.

I was around sixteen when I got baptized at the Coaldale MB church, and the custom was that, after giving your testimony, people in the congregation were free to ask you questions.

So, I finished my testimony and was standing at the front of the church, when I saw my Grandpa Dueck stand up. My heart sank.

“So Ryan,” he says, “my question is this: ‘Are you holy?’”

I stared blankly ahead, like a deer in the headlights.

If I say, “Yes, I *am* holy,” everyone will surely think I am arrogant and self-righteous! If I say, “No, I am not holy, everyone will surely wonder what dark sinful secrets I am hiding and refuse my baptism!”

Now, the answer my grandpa was looking for—the answer that he supplied *for* me after I awkwardly uhhmm-ed and ahhh-ed for a few seconds—was “Yes, you are holy because of what Jesus has done for you.” But in the moment, I felt like there was no right answer.

Jesus, thankfully, was not a frightened sixteen-year-old kid.

He promptly puts the Pharisees squarely back in their place in the cleverest way.

“Show me the coin used for paying the tax,” he says.

And the Pharisees pull one out of their pockets, thus demonstrating that they are *in possession* of the hated coin used to pay the hated tax, thus demonstrating that they have *already made their decision* and are merely playing games with him, trying to *trap him*.

After asking them to say whose image is on the coin, we hear the famous line:

Give to Caesar what is Caesar and to God what is God’s.

Now, this is a statement that people have wrestled with for thousands of years, trying to come to conclusions about what Jesus was saying about how we ought to live as people of faith with respect to those in political authority.

I could go in that direction at this point, but I’m not going to. Perhaps another time. If you saw this text in the bulletin last Sunday and were hoping for a rousing, politically charged sermon, I apologize ☺.

I don’t think this is a passage where Jesus is offering a one size fits all summary statement of the nature and extent of Christian political engagement, but the main reason

for not going in this direction is because I don't think the Pharisees were really interested in having a debate about religion and politics. They weren't really interested in Jesus' opinion about where our obligations to Caesar stop and our obligations to God start.

They weren't trying to formulate a theology of culture or political engagement.

What they *were* doing (quite obviously) was trying to trap Jesus. They were trying to get him to say something that would incriminate himself either before the religious leaders of Israel or before the Romans.

And, as always, Jesus *sees right through* their intentions, right through their duplicitous motives, right through their agendas, right through their religious systems designed to manage God and control people.

He sees them exactly as they are and he exposes them before their peers and all the others present.

I want to focus for the rest of the sermon on this aspect of the story—the *seeing*.

I spent most of this past week at a MCA pastors retreat at Camp Valaqua.

The theme of the retreat was “reflective practice.” We were encouraged to pay attention to *ourselves* in ministry—our dispositions, reactions, anxieties, secrets, hopes, fears, etc.—and ponder what these things might have to say about who we are and what we might hope to be, whether as pastors or as human beings in general.

This was all fine. But one day, we had to do *group exercises*.

I tend not to like group exercises at retreats. I resent feeling like a lab rat in some facilitator's experiment. I grumble (mostly inwardly) at the idea that someone is trying to engineer a certain response to make specific point and that I am being used in the process. So generally, when I hear, “we're going to move toward a group exercise” I tend to think, “I wonder if it's time for a 15 minute bathroom break?”

But I was a little slow on Wednesday. So, there was no getting away from the exercise.

The facilitator wanted us to turn to the person beside us and silently maintain direct eye contact for ninety seconds.

Ninety seconds! Ninety seconds of staring wordlessly into the eyes of, as it happened, Doug Klassen from Foothills Mennonite in Calgary!

I like Doug. But *ninety seconds?! I can't even look in Naomi's eyes for ninety seconds without saying something or looking away!*

But, it had to be done. And it was every bit as awkward and uncomfortable as I expected it to be. I shuffled and averted my gaze. I gulped and swallowed and adjusted my position on the chair. Ninety seconds seemed an eternity.

Eventually, the exercise did end. And as I gradually started to breathe again, as I coaxed myself back from the melodramatic precipice, I began to wonder about why, exactly, I found this exercise so difficult.

Was it the looking into the eyes of another that I found unsettling? Was it the wondering about the story behind those eyes? Was it the involuntary intimacy of such prolonged, direct attention upon another human being? Was it the violation of social and conversational norms whereby we periodically provide our neighbours with a bit of respite from our attention? Probably.

But the more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that *far* worse than seeing someone else was *being seen*.

What if this person sees me for who I really am?

What if my eyes betray the countless duplicities and hypocrisies that I often unsuccessfully try to avoid?

What if the eyes truly are a window into the soul, with all its ugliness and shame? What if this person sees me—truly *sees me*—and they don't like what they see?

Earlier that day, we had spent some time in Psalm 139, this famous psalm of David about the reality that we are *known*, in the deepest and most penetrating ways, by God. Near the end, we read:

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts...
(Psalm 139:23).

I admire David, but I'm not sure I want to be known like this. This is a knowing that leaves me vulnerable, out of control, dependent. There is weakness in being known like this. So often, I prefer the illusions of control.

I will manage the amount of me that can be known, thank you very much, God. Take your searching and testing and knowing somewhere else if you don't mind!

The next morning, after yet more meetings and workshops, we all gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper before we all headed back home. I was mentally already gone, already on my way home. There was so much to do, so much to think about, so many things undone, clamouring around for space in my brain. I am embarrassed to admit, that I wanted to get this over with as soon as possible.

I happened to be sitting directly in front of a simple little table with a small loaf and a cup of juice along with a few stones that one of the other pastors had used for an earlier devotional when we were invited to pray.

I took off my hat and leaned forward in prayer.

About halfway through the prayer, I opened my eyes and observed myself from the outside, as it were.

Leaning forward, arms on my knees, with my hat upturned in my hands, like a beggar, before these symbols of the One who was shattered for love's sake.

What I saw was that this One sees me, just like he saw the Pharisees...

And he gives himself away anyway.

For my sake—no matter what he sees in my life. For your sake—no matter what he sees in your life. For the sake of the world he loves.

I want to look one more time at Jesus' famous response to the Pharisees.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar and to God what is God's.

What if we were to ...Ok, well, how shall we divide it up then? Do I owe 70% of myself to God and 70% to Caesar? Or is it 80/20?

Sounds absurd, right?

It becomes obvious that Jesus wasn't trying to get the Pharisees to busy themselves figuring out where, precisely, to draw the lines in their religious and political systems. They didn't need much encouragement in that direction ☺.

Jesus wasn't reinforcing the idea that there was some "private" realm of spirituality or "heavenly things" where God was allowed to operate, and a "public" realm of everything else, where Caesar was in charge.

His point, I think, was to remind them that they were of course to give *everything* to God.

Caesar could have his little coin with his imaginary divine inscriptions. But God required much more.

We will see this in a few weeks when we focus on what Jesus says only a few verses later in Matthew 22, in response to *another* attempt to trick him.

Quoting Deuteronomy 6, Jesus says a few more famous words:

Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart and with *all* your soul and with *all* your mind... *All* the Law and the Prophets hang on this (Mat. 22:38-40).

All.

Not part. All.

Love me with all of who you are.

Give to God what is God's...

So, what do we give to God? How do we come to him?

We come with nothing—nothing to offer, nothing to impress God, nothing to earn his favour, nothing that will compel him, no religious boundaries and theological systems to protect ourselves from the God who knows us more truly than we will ever know ourselves.

We come with everything. All of who we are. Heart, mind, and soul.

Because we serve a God who *became* nothing and gave *everything* for love's sake.

The image of Caesar can quite easily fit on a little coin.

The image of the *living God* requires an entire human life, freely offered back to the One who sees right through us, and loves us completely.

Amen.

