

“Foiling Entrapment with Innocent Questions”

Salado UMC, Salado, Tx 76571—Confirmation II

Preaching Text: Matthew 22:15-22

18 October 2020—20th Sunday after Pentecost

+++++

“Sometimes the questions are complicated and the answers are simple”

Dr. Seuss (1904 - 1991).

+++++

A relationship I treasure is my friendship with Troy Brennan. Both a roommate at SMU and a Rhodes scholar, Troy is a pretty smart fellow. His first fulltime job was teaching at Harvard’s Medical School. At SMU, Troy took some student concerns to then President James H. Zumberge. As Troy was the equivalent of the student body president, he had access to SMU’s president.

We were all confident about the outcome, but when Troy came out of the president’s office, he looked stunned. We asked him what happened. He said, “When I went into his office, I thought one way, but after he asked me a series of questions, I disagreed with myself. Now, we are back where we were.” We all wondered what happened. I think I know. Zumberge gently slammed Troy with the Socratic Method, a method of asking questions that leads to a new truth. President Zumberge used the method on Troy like a hammer. Jesus, too, knew how to ask the right question at the right time. Hear our Gospel lesson, Matthew 22:15-22:

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So, they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?

Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away (Matthew 22:15-22).

We know that Matthew narrates the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem at chapter 21. Soon, Jesus cleanses the temple and curses the fig tree. At this point, the religious authorities give away their anxiety. So, they test Jesus by questioning Jesus’ authority. Then Jesus tells parables and teaches the people and those who question him. Tension builds as one person or group after another test Jesus. First, come the chief priests and

elders. Later, the Sadducees take Jesus on. Today's lesson tells the story of how the Pharisees and the Herodians try to ensnare Jesus.

The story itself is simple enough on its face. The Pharisees plot to entrap Jesus by asking him a "yes or no" question, which, of course, neither they, nor anyone else, could answer. The question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" The Pharisees know if Jesus answers "yes," it will offend the religious. Likewise, if Jesus answers "no," then, according to Roman law, Jesus will be guilty of treason. Either way, Jesus' answer becomes a dangerous Catch-22.

So, as a person with a vividly faithful mind, Jesus calls for a coin, asks whose head/image is on it, and replies: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." First of all, by asking for the coin Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of those who ask the question. As observant Jews, the law forbids Jews to possess graven images—like the one a Pharisee has in his pocket. Carrying the coin makes them guilty of that by which they try to trick Jesus. Jesus, by his quick thinking, throws the question back on those who ask the question.

On a second level, the word for "image" reveals the coin to have a likeness of Caesar on it. We also remember that God created humans/Jews in God's image. When Jesus asks the Pharisees, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" he tests their loyalty. Plainly, all people under Roman rule, must pay taxes. Yet, Jesus allows that paying taxes is tolerable, but the image language reminds all who hear Jesus that while Roman has a sphere of authority, all things belong to God. This is because behind Jesus' answer lurks a text that all Jews know: "Let us make humankind in our image" (Genesis 1:26). Thus, all humans bear God's image—both Gentiles and Jews.

Jesus' questions spare him briefly from a legal dilemma. But Jesus' questions shed a sober light on the truth. Jesus accomplishes this by asking, "Why are you putting me to the test?" and "Whose head is this, and whose title?" Toss in a summary, and Jesus has clearly won this debate round. Our passage finishes this way: "When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away."

At times, Jesus asks questions, prodding disciples to action, like when he asks:

Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember" (Mark 8:17-18)?

Sometimes, Jesus reveals his astonishment at his disciples' "dim-wittedness:" "Do you not yet understand" (Mark 8:21)? At other times, Jesus' questions simply invite listeners to ponder something of grand importance. For example, Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which

of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers" (Luke 10:36)?

Every so often, Jesus asks questions for information. Jesus once asked a blind person, "What do you want me to do for you" (Luke 18:41)? But sometimes, Jesus' questions evoke a confession of faith: "Do you believe in the Son of Man" (John 9:35)? Jesus asks questions of everyone, friend and foe. He asks women and men; he asks the authorities and those who have no authority. Often, he asks his apostles questions as a way of teaching and inspiring them to a better life of discipleship. Remember how Jesus' questions produced this emotional moment in Peter's life?

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

The Prague born German poet, philosopher, and essayist, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875 - 1926), once wrote, "Live your questions now, and perhaps even without knowing it, you will live along some distant day into your answers." Perhaps the most important question that Jesus, or anyone, will ever ask you is this question: "But who do you say that I am" (Matthew 16:15)? You may, in Rilke's words, "live along some distant day into your answer—with God's help."

David N. Mosser, Salado UMC, Salado, Texas 76571