**20th Sunday after Pentecost**

**October 18, 2020**

**St. James Episcopal Church, Louisa, Virginia**

**Rev. Dr. Jennifer L. Lazzuri**

**Year A**

**Matthew 22:15-22**

**Binding Questions**

This past week has been full of Supreme Court confirmation hearings for Judge Amy Coney Barrett. Confirmation hearings are simply put, meetings to decide whether an official job should be given to someone who was suggested for it. Generally it is a time of questioning, and it is always interesting to see if people spend their time questioning, and if they do, how they frame their questions, or if they use it as a platform to make a statement that they wish to convey. You can believe that everything that is said is well thought out and worded with a specific outcome in mind.

I have a lawyer friend. One thing that I like about him is how he challenges me to think and choose my words wisely. He deliberately challenges my thinking at times when I say something - and I am aware that our thinking - though largely not different on most things - is approached differently. He is a bit sharper, more refined, quicker, and he is deliberate about what he says- not speaking until he has thought through things, while I can speak and then think about what I said.

He intuitively approaches conversations with a bit of challenge- looking for the loop hole or faulty thinking. It does help me refine my words and thoughts. He is a master questioner. It is his trade.

In 1995, Justice Elena Kagan, then a young law professor, wrote a law review article calling Supreme Court confirmation hearings “a vapid and hollow charade.” “The safest and surest route to the prize,” she wrote, “lay in alternating platitudinous statement and judicious silence” [[1]](#footnote-2) John Roberts Jr. in writing about Justice Sandra Day O’Connor’s confirmation hearings said, in speaking of her approach, “the approach was to avoid giving specific responses to any direct questions on legal issues likely to come before the court, but demonstrating in the response a firm command of the subject area and awareness of the relevant precedents and arguments.”[[2]](#footnote-3) In 1993 at Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s confirmation hearing she distilled the responsibilities of nominees into a pithy phrase: “No hints, no forecasts, no previews.” [[3]](#footnote-4)

Answering questions directly can put you in a bind. Lawyers look for times when people’s answers appear contradictory. Questions are well thought out.

I am learning with my lawyer friend to not answer him off-the-cuff. There is usually more to the question than what meets the eye. Usually, upon reflection for a moment, I see where he is headed.

In today’s Gospel text Jesus finds himself in one of these situations. He was not coached as if heading into a confirmation hearing, but I think any coaching those for a confirmation hearing would have been proud of his responses. The text begins by stating the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. They ask, ***“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?”***  This appears straight forward- is it lawful or not?

The Pharisees are the religious rulers of the day. If Jesus answers “yes” to pay taxes - then the religious leaders will accuse him of idolatry (is it not Caesar’s image on the coin?- making a graven image was forbidden), but if he says to not pay taxes- then he will be accused of not doing his civic duty, a rebel, accused of treason. It’s a set up.

Jews in first century Palestine paid a lot of taxes. There was a temple tax, land taxes, customs and trade taxes. The tax in this text was an additional tax, one particularly despised by Jews- called the Imperial tax, required as a tribute to Rome to support the Roman Empire. Jews in paying this tax, were supporting their own occupation.

Most of Jesus’ followers would oppose this tax. The Herodians (also mentioned in this passage) appear to be local sympathizers with King Herod, the local ruler supported by Rome. They may not have been as opposed to this tax, but most

Jews found this tax offensive - they were nationalists, and it reminded them of their occupation by the Roman Empire. Any conversation about this tax would be divisive.

If Jesus advocated paying this tax, he would disappoint his followers. If he answered another way and advocated not paying this tax, he would be in trouble with Roman rulers. It is a clever question. It is set up to be a no win question. Jesus would be in a bind however he answered this question.

Jesus is aware of this and calls them out, “you hypocrites”.

Jesus asks, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” Another translation is, “Whose likeness is this?” A seemingly casual, harmless, irrelevant question. But the question is used to point to something else.

Good questions always get you to think about something else. Something you may be missing. They go deeper. Jesus does not get trapped into answering their question directly. He is not trapped into either/or thinking, He looks at it in a different way. I often realize I am stuck when I find myself utilizing either/or, yes or no, thinking.

Jesus responds to their question saying, “give to the Emperor what is the Emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

Jesus turns the conversation around by getting to the heart of the issue.

The real questions here are not “do I pay taxes?, or “whose image is on the coin?” (they could all see it) but rather, whose image is on us? What are the things that belong to God? We are.

Jesus turned the conversation into something else. “Why are you acting like this?” is his unstated question. He is talking about His claim on our lives. You- who are imprinted with the image of God, you who bear God’s image - give to God what is God’s. Why are you acting like this?

We bear God’s likeness and are therefore made to be more than we sometimes realize.

Pause for a moment to let that sink in. We were made in the image and likeness of God, and because we bear God’s likeness we are to act like God. Not mind you, like gods, those who lord their authority over others for self-gain, but rather like God – the One who creates and sustains and nurtures and redeems and saves…no matter what the cost. We are called, that is, to serve as God’s agents, God’s partners, and God’s co-workers, exercising dominion over creation not as an act of power but rather as an act of stewardship and extending to all the abundant life God wishes for all.

Notice that despite the fact that Jesus’ opponents carry a coin with a graven image and confession of Caesar’s divinity, Jesus accuses them of neither blasphemy nor disloyalty. He calls them hypocrites. A hypocrite is a person who pretends to have virtues, morals, or religious beliefs that he or she does not actually possess, especially a person whose actions belie their stated beliefs.

He calls them hypocrites, those who have quite literally taken to wearing another, and false, likeness.

So perhaps the charge against those trying to entrap or discount Jesus then or now is best understood as amnesia, for they have forgotten who they are, in whose likeness they were made.

It is a good reminder in this day when we are divided and have put labels on ourselves politically, socially, theologically - that we remind ourselves of our **primary** identity. We are God’s children and stewards, made in the likeness of God and charged to act like the God we see in Jesus.

Figuring out what that looks like is rarely easy. But I pray the world can detect the family resemblance.

Amen.

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1. New York Times, October 12, 2020, ***Barrett’s Testimony is a Deft Mix of Expertise and Evasion,*** Liptak, Adam. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. New York Times, October 13, 2020, Liptak, Adam, ***Barrett’s Testimony…*** [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. New York Times, October 13, 2020, Liptak, Adam, ***Barrett’s Testimony…*** [↑](#footnote-ref-4)