

Proper 24A (Pentecost 20)

Sunday Said Mass at the High Altar

by the Reverend James Ross Smith

Isaiah 45:1–7; Psalm 96:1–9; Matthew 22:15–22

In the Spanish language there are two entirely different verbs used to say that something “is.”

“Maria is from New York.” “Maria is *in* New York”: same verb in English, two different verbs in Spanish. And Spanish speakers know the difference, and they look at you strangely when you don’t.

This is a problem for English speakers. Our brains rebel. Why make something so incredibly simple so very complicated? My Spanish teacher patiently explained the difference between the two verbs to me long ago, but now the explanations have stopped. Now, there is only conversation. We talk about many things. Sometimes, I know the correct verb to use without thinking. Sometimes, I guess. Sometimes, I make mistakes. My teacher corrects me gently, and we move on, him infinitely patient, me trying to let go, trying to surrender, trying to go deeper, trying to see if my brain can think, if only for a little while, in Spanish.

I think that’s the kind of teacher Jesus is. He’s not so interested in getting people to learn abstract concepts,

memorize the rules, or pass the quiz. That's why he tells parables and asks a lot of questions. He doesn't rely on professorial explanations. He nudges his listeners—sometimes gently, sometimes not—to think more, to care more, to go more deeply. Often, he wants folks to understand what they actually mean when they say, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord is God, the Lord is One” (Deuteronomy 6:4). He wants them to know what it feels like to bind those words on their arms and inscribe them on their doorposts. He doesn't want people just to *hear* those words. He wants them to live their lives as if they actually believed them. I think that's what today's gospel is about. Jesus wants us to get serious about giving to God the things that are God's. He wants us to feel, if only for a little while, what it means to believe that God is the source of every blessing.

Jesus' audience in this passage is not friendly. They are Pharisees, who are concerned about a certain kind of law-observance, and Herodians, who are concerned about keeping their Roman friends happy. Matthew tells us that they are trying to set a trap for Jesus, to force him to say something that will get him in trouble. Matthew says quite explicitly that the trap is about words, about *speaking*. They want Jesus to *say* something about Jews paying taxes. They want to force him to go on the record about a volatile issue, an issue

that is entangled in an argument about money, empire, nationalism, power, collaboration, and resistance. Around the year 6 CE, when Jesus was just a child, a man named Judas the Galilean preached non-compliance with the census designed to make the collection of the Romans' crippling taxes more efficient. Failure to heed Judas's rebellious warnings sometimes led to violent reprisals against those who *did* pay the tax. It also, in the end, led to the execution of Judas's sons and a brutal end to the tax revolt. Twenty-five years later, the Romans are still collecting their taxes, and they are bitterly resented for doing just that. Judas the Galilean's aggressive assertion that God, not the Roman emperor, is Israel's king remains radioactive in its rebelliousness, but it is a claim that has not gone away. Jesus' antagonists know that a public discussion of this issue is dangerous, and so they decide to force Jesus to discuss it, convinced that the trap they've set is escape-proof. They are sure that Jesus will have to choose. He must say *something*. If he says, "Don't pay the tax," he is a revolutionary. If he says, "Pay the tax," he is a collaborator; and Jesus famously, and with a certain ease, simply avoids the snare, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21).

Jesus' refusal to say more than this makes the passage hard to interpret. The German New Testament scholar,

Ulrich Lutz, as he often does in his commentary on Matthew, outlines the ways in which this passage has been interpreted over the centuries. He points out what I did not know: the Protestant reformers, Luther and Calvin, tended to see this gospel passage as Jesus promoting a balanced approach to state-church relations. They, unlike their Anabaptist opponents, saw Jesus insisting that believers must obey the ruler in all temporal, worldly matters. Interpreters in the early church, in medieval and modern Roman Catholicism, and in the post-World War II Protestant churches have not been so sure of this approach, and I agree (See Lutz, Ulrich, *Matthew 21–28*, Hermeneia Series, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2005, pp. 63–64).

Remember that the Pharisees set out to “entangle Jesus in his talk.” So, what does Jesus do? He doesn’t talk. He doesn’t debate. He asks for a coin, the very coin used to pay the tax, and he asks them, “Whose likeness—the word is *eikon*, icon—and what inscription is this? Though we cannot be sure, it seems likely that the coin in Jesus’ hand was Roman, minted during the reign of the current emperor, Tiberius. On the front of the coin was an image of the emperor. The inscription on that coin read, “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus.” On the opposite side of the coin was a female figure, seated, perhaps Peace personified, and with an inscription that read “Pontifex Maximus,”

which was Tiberius's title, High Priest of the Romans' polytheist religion. Imagine Jesus holding this coin up for all to see, calm, in control, unafraid; and then consider what he was holding. If anything is radioactive here, it is the coin, an object that demanded reverent submission to the Roman emperor and a tacit acceptance of his claims to divinity. Tiberius was not the Jews' *pontifex maximus*, his priesthood was pagan and Roman, and to see those words on the coin was to be reminded of these words from Deuteronomy, "Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which he made with you, and make a graven image in the form of anything which the LORD your God has forbidden you" (4:23).

Jesus is not playing a game here. He's not trying to win points by resorting to a clever trick of show-and-tell. He refuses to allow his antagonists to "entangle him in [their] talk," not just to win a debate, but so he can help us to think as he does, thinking Godwards, asking ourselves, How can I give back to God some small part of what God has given to me? How can I live the greatest commandments, love God, love neighbor? How can I live my life, never forgetting that God is the giver of life and the source of every blessing? And, with that awareness, how do I answer this question: what might it mean to render to Caesar? What do we owe, not just to ourselves and our families, but to this city,

state, nation, and to people around the world? What do we owe each other? Why do we pay taxes and what do we want our taxes to do? Can paying taxes, contributing to the common good, ever be an observant act? And as we fill out our ballots on November 3rd, can we find a way to think of doing so as a righteous deed? As we slide those ballots into the scanner, can we find it in our hearts to pray, “Help me always, Lord, to love you, to love my neighbor, and to forgive my enemies?”

The brilliant thing about today’s gospel is this: no bishop, priest, pastor, or politician can answer those questions for you. Those questions, and others like them, are yours. Jesus has given them to you. May we always try to answer them, as we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

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