

On the front of your bulletin, you'll find the image of a coin. It's a Roman coin, a denarius, minted in the first half of the first century, around the time of Jesus, by a man named Tiberius Caesar. His picture is on one side of the coin, and the inscription that encircles his head declares him the son of the divine Caesar Augustus, which was his claim on the almost-absolute power he possessed. On the other side of the coin there's a stylized picture of a woman, representing peace. She's seated on her throne, and in one of her hands she holds stalks of wheat, symbolizing prosperity, and in the other hand, she holds a spear, symbolizing power and the violence that protected and ensured that power. The inscription on that side of the coin reads "Pontif Maxim," one of the titles of the emperors of ancient Rome.

This coin was designed to send two different messages. Both are strong messages, but in some ways they are very different from each other. One of the messages is a promise: this promise was that if you were a subject of the empire, that the empire would bring you peace and prosperity, or at least, peace and enough prosperity to ensure your daily bread. The other message, though, was a warning: we have the power, it said, the emperor has the power, Rome is the power around here, and anyone who claims otherwise must be destroyed.

You see, the coins of Jesus' day were designed to do much more than just serve as money. They were designed to be millions of little billboards, in purses and pockets all over the Roman Empire, plastered with the face of mighty Caesar, specifically designed to carry those two messages to anyone who had occasion to use one.

A coin, in the ancient world, was a particular kind of political advertising. We know a lot about political advertising, living in Colorado only a couple of weeks before a presidential election. So close to an election in a swing state, we might be glad if coins were the only political advertising we ever had to see. Our political advertising is designed to help one person or another gain or maintain power, but Rome's political advertising was designed to help remind people of who the real power was. Coins were a tool of the empire to give its subjects subtle reminders about their place in the world. They were reminders of where one's ultimate loyalty was supposed to be. A coin with the emperor's face on it reminded you of the taxes you owed to him, the loyalty that was due him, and the deference you were supposed to show him. Every time you bought food, or paid a bill, or sold livestock, or found a coin lying in the dust, you were reminded of who was really in charge of your life.

It was a coin a lot like the one on the front of your bulletin that was at the center of Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees in the story that we just heard read. The Pharisees were a group of law-observing Jews who often engaged with Jesus in conversation and debate. In this story, the Pharisees were skeptical about Jesus, unsure of what to make of him, but I think genuinely curious about what he would say about paying taxes to Caesar. They asked him: is it lawful to pay these taxes? The picture on the coin, some felt, was the kind of graven image that was forbidden, and anyway, they weren't sure they WANTED to support the Romans through their taxes or in any other way. Jesus asked if any of them had a coin he could look at. One of them found a denarius like the one on the front of your bulletin, and brought it to him. And as they all looked at it together, the power of Caesar was felt in that group of Jews gathered some 1500 Roman miles from seat of the empire. Even far away from the center of Roman power, that gathering of Roman subjects could hardly ignore the warning carried on that coin, and the warning was this: if you were thinking of challenging us, don't.

So it was a serious question that Jesus faced from those Pharisees, whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. It was no idle discussion on tax policy like you might see on the Sunday morning talk shows. Jesus' answer to that question had real consequences. If he answered yes, that it **was** lawful to pay taxes to the

emperor, then he would be accused of abetting the Romans. If he answered no, that it was not lawful, then as soon as the word got back to the Romans, he was sure to be in big trouble for inciting an insurrection. The stakes were enormous, and the questions that hung in the balance were perhaps even greater. Jesus was being asked to choose between religion and Caesar—between God and country, to make a decision whether to stake his life on his religious principles, or compromise those principles to save his life.

Few of us are ever asked to make such decisions. We don't live in a country where upholding our religious beliefs puts us in danger of being executed by the government, and we can thank God for that. We are largely free from the turmoil that must come with being asked to answer questions like the one Jesus was asked.

But we do face questions. We do face challenges to the ways we order our worlds, to the value systems we would like to think we hold to. While they're not likely to put our lives in danger, every day we are asked to compromise the things we hold true. You see, we might go along, in our heads, with Jesus, when he says that it is the poor who are blessed, but we still can't ignore the call of this world that tells us we need more, more, more. We might agree in our hearts with the

prophet Micah who tells us that God requires only that we do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with God, but sometimes we find it easier to do nothing than to do justice. We might even agree in our minds with one of the oldest of the Jewish laws, love your neighbor as yourself, but when it comes time to actually do that loving, when we're face to face with that neighbor, we find ourselves shrinking from the call God has put before us. We too know what it is like to have to choose between the way God calls us to be, and the way the world wants us to be.

This language I'm using about God's way versus the world's way; you're probably not used to hearing it from the pulpit of a progressive church like this one. Usually it's more conservative Christians who are condemning the ways of the world and asking the people to turn back to God. But I think we progressive Christians should think carefully about how worldly we become. We pacify the world at our own peril.

Last week I was sitting at a restaurant not far from this church, having lunch, and I overheard a conversation going on at the next table. At that table was a family, two parents and three or four kids. I know it's not polite to eavesdrop, but as I was eavesdropping, it became clear that the father had worked in the financial

industry, and had recently lost his job. He was having to explain this to his children, that there wasn't going to be as much money as there had been before. At first his children didn't take it too seriously, but after a while they could sense in their parents' tone that the family really was in a difficult situation. They grew somber and started asking questions. Did he think he could get another job? He didn't know, he said. Where would they get money? He had something he was working on, he said, but he just wasn't sure. What would they do, they asked? He had to say he didn't know.

I tell this story not to editorialize on the recent economic crisis, but rather, I tell it because it underlines and emphasizes the way our society keeps score. The mom and the dad in that family seemed to me to be great parents; they had taken the time to sit down with their kids and explain what was going on in their lives. I could sense that they were kind, loving, and supportive parents, and my hunch is that for those children, that conversation at lunch will someday be only a small dark spot in the memory of an otherwise happy childhood, if they remember it at all. But at that moment, both for the parents and the children sitting around that table, their world was crumbling. That father wasn't any less of a man, but I'm sure that he felt like he was. That mother wasn't any less of a mother, but I'm sure she felt powerless to do anything. Those children had seen a part of their

world fall apart over lunch, and you could tell that they were struggling to figure out how to feel about it. By the reckoning of the world, that family's dignity and worth had just taken an enormous hit. The good things about their lives, in the world's eyes, were evaporating in front of them. And it was obvious that they were paying attention to what the world said. They were giving the world the power to dictate the terms of their lives.

Standing there with the Pharisees so many years ago, Jesus looked at the face of Caesar Tiberius on that coin, the face of the man who tried to dictate the terms of his life, and he gave an answer that nobody was expecting. Jesus could have sided with the religious folks and denounced the government. He could have sided with the Romans and turned his back on his religion, and everyone there was hoping he would do one or the other of those things. But he didn't do either one of those. His answer was, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." It's an answer that was then as it is now stunning in its simplicity, and innovative in its refusal to insist on a black-and-white view of the world. It was an answer that said, there is a place for cooperation and participation in the world, a place to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, in the words of the old King James. It was not a world-denying answer but a world-diminishing answer; not a call to arms against the world, but a call to faithfulness

to the things that really are of God. And that is the point upon which Jesus' answer turns—give to God what is God's, but do so knowing that in the end it is all God's. All we have and all we are comes from God.

Lest we forget that there can be real consequences for those who see the world as Jesus saw it, for those who understand that everything ultimately belongs to God, we should remember that it was only a few days later that Jesus was put on trial by the representatives of the man whose face was on that coin. At that trial, Jesus was accused of forbidding people to pay taxes to the emperor. A twisting of his words, yes, a misrepresentation, to be sure, but in the end, the kind of consequence he might have expected.

We are not all called to die on crosses like Jesus, but we are all called to see the world as Jesus saw it—to see the world through the eyes of God. We are bombarded with political advertising, with reminders of where the world thinks our loyalties ought to lie, with reminders of how the powers of this world expect us to live our lives. Our task is to keep before us the vision of the world that Jesus saw: a world of peace and justice and righteousness and fairness, and above all, love. These are the things of God. Let us strive to do what Jesus did: give to the

world what we ought to give to it, and reserve for God what belongs to God.

Amen.