

Texts: Psalm 1.1-3; Matthew 22.15-22

Title: Children's Sabbath: Remembering Whose We Are

Location: Community Presbyterian Church, Celebration, FL

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### Psalm 1.1-3 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>Happy are those  
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
or take the path that sinners tread,  
or sit in the seat of scoffers;  
<sup>2</sup>but their delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law they meditate day and night.  
<sup>3</sup>They are like trees  
planted by streams of water,  
which yield their fruit in its season,  
and their leaves do not wither.  
In all that they do, they prosper.

### Matthew 22.15-22 (NRSV)

<sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’ <sup>18</sup> But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup> Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ <sup>21</sup> 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.’ <sup>22</sup> When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

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One Saturday when I was 7 or 8 years old, I tagged along as my Mom picked up my brother and three of his buddies from the community league where they’d had basketball practice. They were all about 12 years old and they’d been running sprints and sweating and felt SO EXHAUSTED my Mom stopped by a convenience store en route home so they could buy some soft drinks. I’m pretty sure this was the PRE-GATORADE era and most of us thought a Coke would quench the thirst.

So the guys TUMBLED out of Mom’s 1965 Plymouth Belvedere and bound inside to the REFRIGERATED drinks while MOM and I waited in the car. Soon enough, they PILED BACK INTO the back seat and Mom pulled out to head for home.

About a mile down the road – just as we were approaching the intersection of Columbia Drive and Rainbow Drive – my brother BURST OUT laughing in the back seat and the other guys laughed with him.

“I didn’t tell you when we were BACK at the store because I KNEW you’d make me go back in,” Stephen said ... “But they gave me a nickel too much change.”

Now this was 1970 or 1971 – and in today’s currency, a nickel translates into something like \$3,000 ... OK, not really, it would be a little more than a QUARTER in today’s economy.<sup>1</sup>

The guys continued to HOOT, but my Mom didn’t say a word. Then – a block or so later – she quietly turned the car around.

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<sup>1</sup> Actually 27 or 28 cents (ro 1971 and 1970, respectively) per the Inflation Calendar of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. See <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>

“What are you DOING?” my brother asked – with just a HINT of concern in his voice. The back seat WENT SILENT.

“I’m turning around,” my Mother said. “You’re going to go back in that store, return the nickel and apologize to the man for taking it.” ... He did.

It wasn’t the first time I’d seen one of my parents act in some DRAMATIC fashion to TEACH a life lesson. Like many children, all three of us had experimented with taking other kid’s toys – or STEALING something that didn’t belong to us or LYING ... and our parents thought it was IMPERATIVE to model HONESTY in the little things.

So I’d heard the lesson all my life – and I’d even seen it ACTED OUT as one of us was forced to take account for a bad choice ... but SOMEHOW, on this day, the lesson SANK IN profoundly. I “got it” in a way that imprinted on my soul ... To the point that just a decade or so later, as a late teen, I was calling the bank from our house, having opened the deposit envelope and found a lot of additional money that a bank teller had given by accident<sup>2</sup> -- then turning my car around and taking it back ... I’d seen it lived out ...

And, AFTER a SUMMER DAY in the Atlanta Zoo, I walked my niece and nephew back to the entrance booth to DOLE OUT MORE CASH when I realized they’d only charged us admission for ONE child instead of two. “Why are we doing this?” my nephew Ben asked ... “Because it’s right,” I said ... I’d seen it lived out.

In short, I GOT the lesson my parents modeled – and I was paying it forward ... It all TOOK SHAPE, in my mind’s eye, from that Saturday morning in my mother’s car.

Thanks to the OK-to-be-inconvenienced EXAMPLE of my parents, I learned before the age of 10 that I could not look the other way and PRETEND that other people’s STUFF belonged to me ...

It sounds so OBVIOUS now, doesn’t it? We’re all sitting here as people old enough to pay attention ... old enough to lead worship ... old enough to have lived a little (or a LOT!), and we think: “Duh ... Don’t take or USE or claim stuff that isn’t yours! ... RIGHT CONDUCT 101!”

But here’s where the problem comes in ... What if it’s NOT SO CLEAR where the OWNERSHIP lies?

When the Pharisees – who were the RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT, the people like ME, of Jesus’ time – send their GROUPIES to ask Jesus a question ... they have a lot of things on their mind. But they aren’t necessarily the innocent notions or confusions of CHILDHOOD.

To understand this, we need to take a brief SWIM in the pool of history so we can get a little context.

The RELIGIOUS GUYS bring to Jesus an issue BLURRED by the political and religious allegiances of the day ... Now, I know this comes as a SHOCK to 21<sup>st</sup> century Christ-followers ... but sometimes human beings can let our POLITICS trump our FAITH. We blend them together in some kind of PERSONAL IDENTITY STEW ... but despite our NICE TALK, politics almost ALWAYS becomes the dominant flavor ... Because that’s how we LIVE IT OUT.

And we’ll even assess whether someone we’ve prayed with or sat next to on the pew is a LEGITIMATE follower of Christ based on how they VOTE ... Crazy ... It happened even in Jesus’ day with the people everyone considered the “serious” God-TYPES, the Pharisees.

They have joined forces with their political OTHER-THANS, the Herodians, about whom we know very little ... NOT in order TO GET an answer for peace, mind you, or to FURTHER CONVERSATION ... but to PUT Jesus on the spot. They’re more focused on TRIPPING up the Rabbi ... on DISCREDITING him and SHUTTING DOWN Jesus’ influence in their CIRCLE OF authority. And they try to catch Jesus UNAWARES by LATHERING him with flattery.

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<sup>2</sup> My deposit slip was correct and some cash had been appropriately given, but the teller had included an extra \$50 – which still feels like a lot of money!

“Oh, Teacher, we know that you’re THE MAN ... that you are completely SINCERE and you don’t SHOW DEFERENCE to people ... So ... is it against the TORAH to pay taxes to the emperor?”

IN CONCEPT the Pharisees oppose the Roman tax – which, to them, means supporting the occupying forces of their land – but they don’t go as far as some of the radical nationalists who publicly resist its payment.<sup>3</sup> The Herodians, on the other hand, are the “peace at any price” folks.

The question these two groups RAISE could GENERATE legitimate concern – especially for people who are so worried about NICKEL and DIMING the law that they MISS THE POINT of loving God and loving others.

But they’re more interested in getting a first century SOUND-BYTE that will ruin Jesus. According to their calculations, if Jesus answers with either a direct YES or NO, one side of this conspiracy will be angry. He will alienate the nationalists (if he says they SHOULD pay taxes) or be subject to arrest by the Romans (if he speaks AGAINST paying the tax) ... Lose/lose for Jesus ... Win/win for them ... OR so it seems.

Jesus SEES right through their “make it sound so pious” scheme ...

For the record, ANY KIND of shyster is distressing, but there are FEW THINGS more UNSETTLING than a SHYSTER who hides behind RELIGIOUS VESTMENTS, titles, language, or media. May God deliver us from ever BEING or BELIEVING that kind of snake in the grass – who’s really more interested in personal power than in TRUTH.<sup>4</sup>

“Show me the coin that’s used for the tax,” Jesus says.

The tax – which reads “census”<sup>5</sup> in the Greek and probably means a head-tax – can be paid only in Roman coin, most of which contain an image and inscription considered blasphemous by many Jews – a GRAVEN image, in violation of the Ten Commandments, and an inscription: *Tiberius Casesar Divi Augusti Filius Augustus Pontifex Maximus* (“Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest”).<sup>6</sup>

Loosely translated: *Caesar ... son of God ... high priest ...*

Jesus asks for the “legal tender” with which the tax is paid – a denarius, the equivalent of a day’s wage. Jesus does not have it himself, but the RELIGIOUS ELITE, in the sacred precincts of the Temple, produce the coin with its idolatrous image and inscription.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus asks a simple phrase. The NIV reads, “Whose portrait is on it?” The NRSV says, “Whose head and whose inscription?” The Greek might read, “Whose image ... does it bear?”

They acknowledge the image and inscription are Caesar’s.

When Jesus pronounces that what is already the emperor’s should be given to him ... he in fact gives an indirect yes. It is not against the Torah (This was the form of the question in v 17, “Is it lawful?”) to pay taxes to the emperor ... What’s more, the Pharisees acknowledge this by participating in the economic system made possible by Rome, even by having Roman coins in the Temple area.<sup>8</sup>

“Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor,” Jesus says, “and to God the things that are God’s.”

In short, he TRUMPS their politics with FAITH.

Since the time of Tertullian, a second century Church Father, interpreters have pondered the possibility that the saying implicitly refers to humans as God’s coin, bearing his image. Since men and women are created in the

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<sup>3</sup> I draw much of the historical detail and even some of the language here from the helpful work of M. Eugene Boring in his notes on Matthew in Leander Keck, ed., *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VIII. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 420.

<sup>4</sup> OK, you’re getting my personal bias here. I’ve lived too long and seen too much!

<sup>5</sup> Actually “kinsos” in the Greek, though the Lainate version would be “census”

<sup>6</sup> Boring, p. 420.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

image of God (Gen. 1.27), they belong to him as surely as Caesar's coins belong to Caesar. To God must be given back what is his ...<sup>9</sup>

So now we've come FULL CIRCLE – back to the issue that won't be resolved by a simple example from one's trusted role models ... a lesson we might not learn by the age of ten. Where does ownership LIE in our lives ... and what ought we GIVE to God?

Scripture reminds us in Psalm 24. 1 (one of my favorite verses): "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it ... The world and all who dwell in it ..."

In all of our fullness – in every aspect of our being ... in life and in death,<sup>10</sup> WE BELONG to God ... But sometimes we CLAIM as ours the things that are really the MAKER'S ...

- We've been given THIS DAY ... but sometimes we pretend that TIME is ours and not God's ... And we will WORK GOD IN, you know, if we get a chance.
- God has designed us for human relationships ... BUT WE hang on to our LOVE LIFE or to a PEER GROUP that influences us in a negative way or to our LIST of people who've WRONGED us, as though God has no say ...
- God has given us health ... BUT we run ourselves ragged and enslave ourselves to a JOB and EAT on the GO and never exercise ... as though God has no voice in how we treat our bodies ... as though our bodies are our OWN and do not belong to God.
- God has promised NEVER to leave us nor forsake us ... And sometimes we act as though God cannot be trusted with our FUTURES ... OR if he CAN be trusted for the down-the-roads, he is certainly NOT trustworthy with our RIGHT NOWs.
- Jehovah-Jirah<sup>11</sup> has PROVIDED for our needs ... but sometimes we look back on a list of successes or accumulation – and we hoard and GLOAT and pat ourselves on the back as though we got there on our own.

Listen to this, from Deuteronomy 8.11-18 ... Still as pertinent today as when it entered the Torah:

*<sup>11</sup> Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. <sup>12</sup> When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, <sup>13</sup> and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, <sup>14</sup> then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, <sup>15</sup> who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid waste-land with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, <sup>16</sup> and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. <sup>17</sup> Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.' <sup>18</sup> But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.*

Why do we do this? Sometimes we know we need God's help to crest a mountain, but when we get to the other side, we act like we got there by ourselves. We forget that all that we are and all that we have belong to God.

Friends, this text call us to remember: Exactly whose image do we bear? ... Do we get it?

Let's give back to God what belongs to God. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993, p. 254.

<sup>10</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Question 1.

<sup>11</sup> See Genesis 22.14 ... Jehovah-Jirah means, "The LORD will provide."