

**Pentecost 20A + October 22, 2017**  
**Matthew 22:15-22**  
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI  
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When do we have the heart to admit that we are wrong about something? And what can come of it? These are the questions that jumped out at me when I was thinking about our gospel reading today from Matthew's Chapter 22. To get there, though, we have to rewind a few weeks to Matthew 21.

Picture the panorama at the beginning of Matthew 21, as if you are seeing it on a wide-view screen in technicolor. Jesus has just passed through the gates into Jerusalem. The long road to the temple in the center of the city is packed on either side with excited crowds. The noise is deafening. They are waving their arms and shouting, "Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" People are tearing off their coats laying them out to line Jesus' path. Others are cutting palm branches and strewing them in the road. It is a gaudy, glittery, raucous scene.

This is not going over well with the Jewish chief priests and elders. To them he is just an itinerant troublemaker. They demand to know what is the source of Jesus' authority. His response is to turn the tables on the Pharisees with a series of parables that challenge *their* authority. Remember this sequence over the past three weeks? First we had the parable about the man and the son who said he wouldn't go work in the vineyard, but then changed his mind. This was a judgment on the Pharisees for their unwillingness

to change their minds about Jesus. Then we had the story of the wicked tenants who were put to death because they failed to care for the vineyard. This was indictment of the Jewish leaders for failing to care well for that which God entrusted to them. Last week we had the wedding banquet, in which Jesus drew a parallel between the arrogant Pharisees and the guest who was not wearing the robe of righteousness. Neither would they be let into God's kingdom if they weren't wearing this robe.

What was the reaction of the Jewish leaders to all this? Did they say, "Jesus, you're right. Now we see that we have not acted in faith as God would have us do?" No. They were more determined than ever to find a way to get rid of him. In today's reading, they try to trap Jesus with a question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Their plan is that, regardless of whether Jesus says yes or no, he will be in trouble. If Jesus says yes, he would be discredited by his people as a prophet who kowtows to secular power. If he says no, he could be accused by the Romans of inciting people to revolution.

Of course, Jesus sees through it right away. His answer completely upends their scheme. Jesus says, "Give to the emperor that which is due the emperor, and to God that which is God's."

This is really pretty straightforward, then and now. Governments are necessary to keep good order. Taxes allow them to function. Assuming the tax system is equitable and laws are just, taxes must be paid and laws must be obeyed. Often this isn't easy, and

some people are tempted to try to get around them. Strangely, the more money people have, the more likely they are to try to cheat the system.

But in the midst of these demands by government on our patience and personal resources, as Jesus calls to mind the coin imprinted with the image of Caesar, he is telling us to recall the image that is imprinted our hearts: That of Jesus Christ himself, the very image of God. That is where our true citizenship lies. God is the source of our authority, and it is God who claims our allegiance. All that we have, all that we are, belongs to God. Remember the words from our hymn (ELW 686)? "We give thee but thine own, whate'er the gift may be. All that we have is thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from thee." For this reason, because all that we have and the totality of who we are belongs to God, God will always care for us. God will always protect us. God will never forsake us.

Now, let's return to my opening question: When do we have the heart to admit that we were wrong? Or better, what kind of heart do we need to have?

What really fascinates me about today's Gospel reading is the Pharisees' reaction to Jesus' answer. They simply leave—amazed, apparently, that Jesus has once again eluded their grasp. Let's imagine that alternate ending. What if they said, "You know, Jesus, you are right? We never thought of it that way. We've been dead wrong all along."

People rarely admit error, especially people in major positions of authority who make headlines for saying something they shouldn't have, or that was factually

incorrect—and then make it so much worse by not only refusing to apologize but turning the blame on others. Does any person of authority ever say, “I was dead wrong?”

Yes. Someone just did. Maybe you caught the story a few days ago from Game 4 of the National League Championship Series. It was the 8<sup>th</sup> inning and the Dodgers were behind by a run. Home plate umpire Jim Wolf called a strike 3 against the Dodgers. But the batter argued it was a foul tip. In conference with other umpires in the crew, Wolf reluctantly agreed to change the call to a foul ball because the pitch hit the dirt. Later he saw that his initial call was correct. He could have let it go, but instead chose to publicly apologize. He said to the media, “After looking at it, I was dead wrong. I talked myself into the whole thing.”

Most of the news stories about this incident focused the fury of the Cubs manager over the whole process, but the real story was Wolf’s admission. It doesn’t matter whether he is or isn’t a religious person. For people of faith, it’s a heartening reminder of the one to whom we belong, he who is our true source of authority. If we confess Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, then truth-telling—in all aspects of life, from large to small—is an expression of God’s will. If you believe with all your heart that you belong to God, then you have nothing to fear in telling the truth. Then you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.

Amen.