

October 18, 2026
Matthew 22:15-22

Pentecost 21
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Being a Saint in the City”

“Give then to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

As a child, one of my favourite sandwiches to take to school was peanut butter and jelly (this was before peanut allergies became an issue). My mother would always make them on wheat bread (white bread was never to be found in our house), Skippy peanut butter, and a brand of jelly called Trappist. It was very good jelly, much better than the more popular brands; but what always fascinated me was the label on the jelly jar which featured a man in monk’s clothing. When I asked my parents one day who that person was, they explained that a monk was a religious person who devoted his life to God, similar to the nuns across the street at the Villa Maria nursing home who were devoted to caring for their senior residents. Since many of the nuns were family friends, I always assumed that monks must also be very friendly people, even though I cannot remember ever meeting a monk during my childhood.

My experience with monks was limited to the figure on the jelly jar until the summer after my first year of seminary, when I took my quarter of Clinical Pastoral Education in Worcester, Massachusetts. CPE is a required course for all seminarians, an opportunity to learn about pastoral care in a hospital or another institutional setting. Shortly after I arrived in Worcester, I learned that there is a Trappist monastery west of the city, which was my opportunity to meet a real-life monk in person. So one Saturday, I drove to Spencer and found St. Joseph’s Abbey set in a beautiful rural setting. As soon as I turned my car into the driveway, I spotted the gift shop for the monastery; when I went inside, I saw shelves full of my beloved Trappist jellies, and behind the counter a real Trappist monk! Sure enough, he was a very friendly person, and when I told him I was a Lutheran seminarian he encouraged me to drive further onto the property and visit the monastery. When I arrived there, I saw a sign that startled and perplexed me: “Monastic Enclosure: Do Not Enter.” There was another sign for a visitor’s entrance, and when I entered the building I began to understand how different the lives of Trappist monks are from other Roman Catholic religious persons and most Christians. The Trappists are officially known as the Cistercian Monks of the Strict Observance, and to say they follow a strict tradition is an understatement. I had arrived in time for noon prayers; but instead of joining the monks in the main chapel, I was seated in the visitor’s gallery that was separated

from the monks by a wrought-iron screen. As no one was I allowed to have any contact with the monks, who I would later learn took vows that included stability, promised to remain in the monastery separated from the outside world. I left St. Joseph's with two impressions after my visit: the monks were kind and dedicated men who do great work, and there was no way I would ever become a monk!

As I have thought back on that experience over the years, I have begun to understand why monastic life might be attractive to some people. While it involves tremendous sacrifice, it also shields a person from having to deal with the challenges and difficulties of living a Christian life in a world that has often been hostile to followers of Jesus Christ. But while living in a monastic enclosure may be tempting at times, we know that as God's people we are called to live and serve in the world, being responsible citizens of our community and nation even as we recognize that *"our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ."* (Philippians 3:20). As the baptized children of God, we are called to be God's saints – God's holy people – who are sent out into the world *"to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."* (Philippians 3:20). While some are called into a monastic life to live out their baptismal calling, most of us are called to be saints in the places we live; and in the words of Bruce Springsteen, *"it's hard to be a saint in the city!"*

This challenge of being people of God who are also subject to human authorities was an issue in Jesus' time, when the Jewish people were under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. Being subject to the Roman authorities included the payment of Roman taxes, which were both a source of revenue for the empire and Rome's mechanism for subjugating people. The people of Israel deeply resented having to pay this tax to their oppressors; this is why tax collectors were so despised at this time, considered traitors for collecting taxes for the very people who would crucify anyone who refused to pay the tax. Roman taxation of Judea was burdensome on the economy and deeply resented by Jews who longed for national independence; *"taxation was a painful reminder that God's people were living under the heel of a foreign power."* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

The issue of paying taxes to the foreign oppressor becomes an issue that the Pharisees seek to use to entrap Jesus in today's Gospel lesson. This passage is part of the controversy series in Matthew initiated by the Pharisees, who had already decided that Jesus must be put to death (*"But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him."* – 12:14). In this episode, the Pharisees hope that they can trick Jesus into saying something that is either politically incriminating or personally discrediting. Their attempt at entrapment *"is typical of controversy*

stories, where the challenge is meant to confuse or confound Jesus, thereby demonstrating power over him.” (Raj Nadella). The irony here is that the Pharisees will be the ones who will be confounded; “Jesus is the master of the situation and refuses to be caught. This, and not abstract doctrine on church and state, is the thrust of the narrative.” (M. Eugene Boring).

The episode begins with the report that *“the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said”* (Matthew 22:15). Matthew adds that they sent their disciples to Jesus *“along with the Herodians,”* political supporters of the Herodian dynasty and its cooperative relationship with Rome. While the Pharisees often openly opposed Roman rule and would seem on the surface to have nothing in common with the Herodians, both groups knew full well the consequences of defying the Roman Empire and had been negotiating with it for decades; *“they were often in bed with Rome in order to pursue their political and economic interests.”* (Nadella). These two adversarial groups now form an alliance solely for the purpose of bringing down the one who many believed was the Messiah. Their devious intent is camouflaged behind extravagant flattery: *“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.”* (22:16). Courteously addressing Jesus as “Teacher” (*rabbouni*), they flatter Jesus as a “truthful man” who teaches “the way of God” and is not influenced by anyone else’s opinion or status. They now presume that they have primed Jesus to fall into their trap as they ask him to *“tell us, then what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”* (22:17). The tax to which Jesus’ opponents are referring was the “census” (*kensos*), the Roman head tax instituted in AD 6 when Judea became a Roman province. This census triggered the nationalist revolt that became the Zealot movement, which led to the disastrous war of AD 66-70 that resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the diaspora of the Jewish people. The tax could only be paid in Roman coin, which contained an image and inscription considered blasphemous by many Jews: *“Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest.”* The emperor’s image and inscription on the coins were a direct violation of the First Commandment in which the Lord God of Israel commanded that *“you shall have no other gods before me”* (Exodus 20:3). The emperor’s image and inscription were also reminders that the Roman Empire was present in every realm of the people’s lives and identified who controlled the economy.

The Pharisees and Herodians believe that they have succeeded in cornering Jesus into a trap in which he will lose no matter how he answers. By giving him only two options for an answer, they believe that he is left with one of two predicaments. If Jesus affirms the propriety of the tax, he will come off as a Roman sympathizer and

will be discredited in the eyes of his people. If Jesus opposes the tax, the Herodians will report him to the Romans for instigating a tax revolt. They believed that Jesus would meet the same fate as Judas the Galilean who led a revolt against the Roman tax in AD 6 that led to his crucifixion. We can imagine the smug look on their faces as they believe that they have tricked Jesus into a no-win situation; but what they do not realize is that Jesus is already *“aware of their malice”* (22:18) and is already several steps ahead of them. After asking his adversaries, *“why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?”* Jesus asks them for a coin used for the tax. It is here that the tables are turned on his opponents; when they quickly *“brought him a denarius”* (22:19), they immediately expose themselves as the hypocrites by which Jesus had identified them. While the Pharisees may have opposed Roman taxation in principle, apparently, they were in the habit of carrying Roman coins and paying the Roman tax like every other Palestinian Jew. Their act exposes the extent *“to which everyone, including (or especially) the Pharisees and the Herodians, has been participating in Caesar’s economy willingly or because they have no other choice.”* (Nadella).

Jesus now turns the tables on his opponents when he examines the coin and asks, *“whose head is this, and whose title?”* to which they have no choice but to reply, *“the emperor’s.”* (22:20-21a). Jesus now has them in his own trap when he replies, *“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”* (22:21b). As Jesus had exposed his adversaries as hypocrites, so now he exposes their question as a false dilemma. While he avoids giving the direct “yes or no” that his opponents had desired when he pronounces that what is already the emperor’s should be given to the emperor, Jesus is in fact giving an indirect “yes.” It is not against the Torah to pay the Roman tax; political and religious obligations can both be legitimately met. *“Paying taxes is not a compromise of one’s duties toward God, nor does serving God exempt one from supporting the civil government.”* (Mitch and Sri).

But Jesus then goes beyond his opponent’s original question, declaring that as one should give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, one should also give *“to God the things that are God’s.”* Paying the Roman tax acknowledges the empire’s political power but not its moral authority to rule; that authority belongs to God. Here Jesus refers to the Kingdom of God, which is at the heart of his proclamation, a kingdom that is radically different from the kingdoms of the world. While the kingdom to which the people are forced to pay taxes reigns over their earthly affairs, the kingdom of God represented by Jesus embraces all of life. Jesus declares that the distinction between what belongs to Caesar (as some things do) and what belongs to God (the ultimate loyalty) must be made. While the image of Caesar was stamped on every

coin used to pay the Roman tax, what belongs to God is the human person who bears the image of the living God (*“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”* – Genesis 1:27). As God’s people give the coins that bear the emperor’s image to the emperor, for those who are created in God’s image *“our highest obligation ... is to give ourselves back to our Maker.”* (Mitch and Sri).

- “Human ordinance cannot possibly extend its authority to heaven and over souls, but belongs only to earth, to the external intercourse of men with each other, where men can see, know, judge, sentence, punish and acquit. Christ Himself made this nice distinction and summed it all briefly when He said, ‘Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.’ If, then, imperial power extended to God’s kingdom and power, and were not something in itself, He would not have made it a separate thing.” – Martin Luther, *Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, 1523.

Matthew reports that after Jesus makes this statement his adversaries *“were amazed; and they left him and went away”* (22:22). But Jesus’ teaching challenges us to consider what it means to belong to the Kingdom of God and to be citizens of the community and nation in which we live. While we know that our citizenship is in heaven because when we are baptized we *“belong to Christ, in which you have been baptized”* (ELW Holy Baptism), we live our lives as God’s people in a society in which we have privileges and obligations that are the reality of every citizen. Luther made a distinction between “two kingdoms” that makes a distinction between the spiritual and temporal dimensions of human existence. Luther taught that God ordained *“the spiritual kingdom by which the Holy Spirit produces righteous people under Christ, and he also ordained the temporal kingdom by which the wicked are restrained and outward peace is maintained ... Christians must participate in both realms.”* (Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism*). We are called to be good and faithful citizens of our communities and nations: participating in the voting process (including the upcoming municipal elections), becoming involved in organizations that work to improve our communities, paying taxes to support the governments that work on our behalf, and praying for our elected officials and persons in authority. We are also called to recognize that we are citizens of the Kingdom of God and it is to God that we give all of ourselves to the one who abides with us in this world as we will one day be called to our eternal home. Being a “saint in the city” is often challenging and difficult; in many places Christians continue to suffer oppression at the hands of secular authorities that actively oppose their presence and ministries. But no matter how challenging our calling is to bring the

light of Christ into the world into which we are called, we know that “*we have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our God; to care for all without reserve and spread God’s liberating word.*” (ELW Hymn 729).

- “People of faith approach the present world with trust in God and, at the same time, with measured realism and humility about human efforts to create a just society. God’s people live in the ‘now but not yet’ of God’s reign and know that no person, community, or society is without sin. For civic life, this means that Christians are called to both engage in bringing about a better world and be vigilant in regard to any earthly arrangement.” – ELCIC Social Statement on Civic Life and Faith, 2025.

For the saints at St. Joseph’s Abbey, their call was to live in the monastic enclosure where they worked making their jellies and praying for God’s people on a daily basis. For most of us, living out our baptismal calling as God’s holy people means being a “saint in the city,” letting our light shine before others so that as we participate in the communities and nations in which we live, we also live as citizens of the Kingdom of God and what it means to live and serve as children of the light, called to bear the Gospel of Christ’s Kingdom to all the kingdoms and people of our world.

Amen.