Montague Pastoral Charge

October 18, 2026 – 21st Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 33:12-23, Matthew 22:15-22

Sermon

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The ancient Greeks told the story of Scylla and Charybdis, two sea creatures who lived on each side of a narrow strait. Scylla was a six-headed, 12-tentacled man-eating monster, who was sure to swallow some of your sailors if you passed too close to her shoal. Just a little way off, Charybdis was a creature of the deep who guzzled vast amounts of water in her whirlpool and then belched them out with volcanic fury. Sail too near her and your whole ship might be sucked down. In Homer's *Odyssey*, there's a famous passage where Odysseus has to sail between the two threats. He must choose to pass by one or the other. The sorceress Circe advises him to go choose Scylla: better to lose six of his crew to her six heads than lose them all with the ship – the lesser of two evils. Odysseus doesn't like that answer, and he is determined that there must be a way to triumph over the monsters, either a way to navigate around the sucking of Charybdis, or to fight off Scylla with sword and spear. Circe responds that there is no safe way through these two deadly options. You just can't win; you're damned if you do, and damned if you don't. "Must you have battle in your heart forever? / The bloody toil of combat? Old contender, / will you not yield to the immortal gods? / That nightmare cannot die, being eternal / evil itself – horror, and pain, and chaos; / there is no fighting her, no power can fight her, / all that avails is flight."

You may have found yourself caught between Scylla and Charybdis before. It's a common complaint of voters looking at the ballot sheet at election time. We find Jesus between Scylla and Charybis today: between the Herodians on the one side and the Pharisees on the other. A rock and a hard place, if ever there was one. Judea was an occupied territory, and the Jewish King Herod was ruling on behalf of the Roman Empire. The Herodians wanted to keep Herod on the throne, and so they were very much in favour of paying the Roman taxes and keeping the peace. The Pharisees, on the other hand, despised the Roman occupation, and they were doing their best to resist the Romans by following the Jewish law strictly and expansively, in the hope that God would soon come to banish the oppressor and reward the righteous. The Pharisees and the Herodians were natural enemies, but we find them working together here to undermine Jesus: to get him to take one side or the other. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" If Jesus answers yes, he is a collaborationist: an enemy not just to the Pharisees but to most of the common people who resented the Roman occupation. If he says no, he is a rebel against Rome, and that is a very dangerous thing to be. Jesus is trapped.

What the two sides have in common is that they are *two sides*; two sides that know where they stand and have already made up their mind. They couch their question in respectful and flattering language, but Jesus knows that this is just the cross-examiner's trick. "Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?'" And that's a very important line: that Jesus is going to answer this question as an answer to *hypocrites*. Why are they hypocrites? Well, they are hypocrites because Jesus knows that they're not really looking for the right answer, because each side already thinks they have the answer. The point is not to

learn something new and be changed by Jesus; the point is to force him onto one side or the other of this ethical dilemma. It is a real ethical dilemma, no doubt about it. But the questioners are hypocrites precisely because they aren't interested in an ethical answer. They want to trap Jesus in the dichotomy they have already settled upon: to make him either an ally or an enemy.

I wonder sometimes if we today can't appreciate the tension in this story, because we are all getting so used to taking sides. Not only in politics, but all over our social lives, outspokenness is one of the great virtues of our time. We don't seem to be as interested in mediators anymore; we want people with strong and decided voices. We seem increasingly to live in a world where our opinions and positions are the most important things about us. There's a part of me that gets excited to see Jesus in this dilemma: "Come on, Jesus, pick a side!" Scylla or Charybdis?

But Jesus is a match for both monsters. "Show me the coin used for the tax," he says. "Whose head is this and whose title?" They answer, "Caesar's." "Then, give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." That must be one of Jesus' most famous one-liners. It's been extremely influential in history on the way we think about church and state, politics and religion, the sacred and the secular. The notion that there are these two domains, Caesar's and God's, and we have to respect them both and keep them in balance. It isn't that the secular and the sacred are equally important – as Christians we have to say that the sacred has a higher status. But obviously we exist in a secular world too, and we need to be involved in it; we have to pay our taxes and we can try to make sure those taxes are used in line with our values and concerns. "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's." There's a lot of food for thought there, and that may be partly why the crowds were "amazed" at Jesus' answer to the question.

But the other reason they were amazed was surely that they were so impressed to see Jesus navigating between Scylla and Charybdis, escaping Houdini-like from this trap the Pharisees and Herodians had set. They hoped to trap him in his words, but his words break the trap. They are liberating, not only for himself, but to the people who heard. Jesus was asked a yes-or-no question, so that he could be categorised in one party or another. So that he could be slotted into his place in these preconceived ethical categories. "Let's see if he's a rebel or a collaborator." We love to do that ourselves. So many Christians, whether we're progressives or conservatives or somewhere in between, find ourselves looking to Jesus not to hear what he has to say and let him change us, but because we want him to back up the ethical positions we already hold dear. It makes Jesus much easier to handle, when we can fit him into one side or the other of a worldview we have already chosen.

But Jesus won't be trapped like that. Notice how he expands the ethical world of the Pharisees and the Herodians. At the end of the day, this really is a black-and-white issue: each person either has to pay the tax or not pay the tax. He doesn't say that there is no right answer, but he widens the horizon and deepens the depths of the discussion. It's no longer just a question of whether Jews can legally give money to a pagan conqueror, it's a question about ownership – about what is Caesar's and what is God's – about creation, about loyalty, about the real meaning of power. Jesus dodges the trap wonderfully, and you may think that it's just a clever way of not answering the question. Sort of like when Bill Clinton told the grand jury that he didn't lie: "It depends on what your meaning of "is" is." That's pretty clever, but what Jesus is doing is more than clever. Jesus is adding another dimension to the controversy; he is complicating an already

complicated issue. Again, it isn't that there's no right answer, but the right answer should take you into deeper reflection about God and God's claim on your life. What belongs to Caesar, and what belongs to God? Do those categories overlap? It's easy to give Caesar his due – you just pay the coin every year. But how do you give to God what is God's?

Again, we could say a lot about church and state, Caesar and God. But before we do any of that, the first message of this story is about freedom. Jesus is not bound by our ethical traps. He can't be used like that. Jesus is the Son of the God of Moses, the Invisible God whose image cannot be engraved on stone or metal. God tells Moses, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live…I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen."

There's a contrast being drawn: Tiberius Caesar, the Emperor whose picture is on each of the coins in your pocket, and God, the One who rules invisibly, whose face cannot be seen by any mortal, God of whom you can only see the back. Caesar is insecure, as rulers often are – he needs to stamp his image on his property. But God has no such insecurity. God does not need God's own face engraved on things. If God minted coins like the Romans, they would be like those trick coins my brothers used to fool me with, where both sides are tails. The beaver, the bear, the Bluenose, the caribou, the loon, the maple leaf…God is content to hide at the back of things – hidden in the tails-side of the world. It's just that humility – that invisibility – that marks the true God from the idols. God does not rule like Caesar, with coin and sword; God rules in the power of the freedom of love. "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the name, 'YHWH' and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."

When Jesus asks them to look at the face on the Roman coin, he is reminding them of who their God is; a God who is different from Caesar, not just in degree, by simply being bigger and wiser and more powerful, but completely different in kind. A God who loves wildly and freely, who can't be seen and yet somehow is more present to these provincial Judeans than Caesar in Rome ever could be.

We all find ourselves caught between a rock and a hard place sometimes – between Scylla and Charybdis, if you like. We have hard ethical decisions to make, not just between right and wrong, but more often between two conflicting rights or between two apparent wrongs. There are times when it feels like we'll be damned if we do and damned if we don't. But no matter how tightly we may be squeezed, there is no strait so narrow that Jesus can't pass through it – and us with him. After all, as the psalms say, "it is God who divides the sea, and God who breaks the heads of the dragons in the waters." There may be suffering on one side or the other, if we do or if we don't, but we are never damned.

Jesus helps us, not because he will necessarily back up one or other of our positions, but because he breaks opens up our ethical imaginations; he doesn't let us trap him in our categories. Christian ethics is not just about taking a set of rules from the New Testament and mapping them onto our questions and dilemmas with yes's or no's as to whether something is legal or not. Before anything else, Christian ethics is about encountering the One who breaks free our moral imagination – who widens our horizons. Jesus has lots of commandments to teach, but he didn't start his sermon on the mount with the commandments, he started it with those radical Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." He begins by

overturning all our expectations about blessing and curse, and letting God totally re-shape our sense of justice. He opens our minds so that we have the capacity to know God, not just as someone who knows what is good, but God who is Goodness itself. If we want to choose what is good, the first thing is to ground ourselves in that Goodness and let it shape us every day.