

Trick Questions

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

Whitefish UMC

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- † You can almost hear them rubbing their hands in glee: the partisans think they have found a sure way to entrap their opponent. They will make him appear ridiculous and contradictory—a liar, erratic, suspicious, shady.
- † No, we're not talking about the current political campaign for President of the United States. But it sure sounds like it, doesn't it? First the leaders try to disguise their trickery with flattery: "We know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality."
- † Can't you just hear the opponents saying, "I honor your service, but..." Or "Your eloquence is well-known..." Then, of course, they proceed to skewer their opponent with trick questions.
- † Things haven't changed much, have they? In today's gospel lesson from Matthew, disciples of the Pharisees and Herodians, form an unlikely pairing of partisans, for the Herodians represent the interests of Herod and other clients of Rome, while the Pharisees hold to the Law of Moses.
- † They come to trap Jesus by providing him with a lose/lose situation. Their question is short and to the point: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" The tax in question is the census tax, a per person tax of a denarius.

- † The dilemma for Jesus is this: If he answers yes, then he could be perceived as being in collusion with Rome, justifying Roman occupation and oppression of the Jews. That would be an unpopular position, to be sure, among the Jewish people.
- † On the other hand, if he answers no, Jesus could be suspected of treason against Rome, and he could be executed. Clearly his opponents have him in a tight spot. They can hardly wait for him to hang himself, literally and figuratively.
- † Did you know that you can buy online a book titled, *Jesus Is Not a Republican*, as well as a T-shirt claiming that “Jesus Votes Republican?” And of course you can find the converse claims and denials about Jesus being a Democrat.
- † We live in confusing and anxious times. Pollsters ask US trick questions. Who and what are we supposed to believe in? “Fear. Panic. Anxiety. These capture well the state of mind of many in America today.” So writes Adam Hamilton, pastor of the largest United Methodist Church in the United States, the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City.
- † “Recently the American Psychological Association released the findings of a survey they conducted of 7,000 American households. The study noted that eighty percent of Americans were stressed about the economy and their personal finances.
- † Half were worried about their ability of provide for their family’s basic needs. Fifty-six percent were concerned about their own job stability. Sixty percent reported feeling angry and irritable, and 52% reported laying awake at night, worried about this.

- † The report concluded that, ‘The declining state of the nation’s economy is taking a physical and emotional toll on people nationwide.’”
- † Meanwhile, Paul Krugman, who recently won the Nobel prize for economics and who is a columnist for the New York Times, offered his own assessment of the nation’s economic condition earlier this year.
- † Krugman says that the U.S. economy is suffering from a “crisis of faith.” He thinks there is a growing lack of trust in our economic institutions and the securities that have backed much of our debt. At the heart of the crisis are problems surrounding the extension of credit.
- † Adam Hamilton notes that “credit” is a part of the language of faith. It comes from the Latin *credere*—to believe or to trust. A version of this word opens the Apostles Creed, *credo*, “I believe.”
- † “In the case of credit, belief or trust is placed in the borrower and their willingness and ability to repay. Our current economic crisis is in part about misplaced trust or faith between debtors and lenders.
- † So far, neither a \$700 billion bailout package, nor a Fed rate cut, nor presidential calls for calm, have stemmed the tide of fear, nor do they seem to adequately speak to the underlying issues that precipitated this crisis of faith.
- † This is a moment when the Bible and people of faith have both the timely word that can calm fears and the most accurate assessment of the underlying issues that led to the current economic debacle.”
- † In today’s Old Testament story from the book of Exodus, we find Moses and God in conversation. God is angry about the making of

the golden calf as an idol to the people Israel. Moses successfully convinces God to spare the Israelites, even though it hasn't taken them long to violate one of the Ten Commandments God has just given them.

- † But then Moses goes down from the mountain and sees for himself just how bad the treachery of the people has been. Moses is so angry that he throws the tablets from his hands and breaks them, burns the golden calf to powder, scatters it on the water and makes the people drink it.
- † Moses' anger continues unabated until he agrees to go back up the mountain to negotiate further for God's forgiveness of the disobedient people. God then charges Moses with leading the people to the land of milk and honey.
- † But Moses isn't about to be tricked into an impossible situation. He wants God's assurance that God will keep his promises and lead the Israelites where they are supposed to go. He wants God to show him God's ways, so he can both know God and find favor before God.
- † Listen again to God's answer: "My presence (literally 'my face') will go with you, and I will give you rest." But Moses isn't convinced: "For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people?"
- † Moses' persistence pays off. God tells him, "I will do the very thing that you have asked, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." But Moses pushes his luck further: "Show me your glory, I pray."
- † And who can blame him? And who can blame us for wanting proof that God will keep the promises of blessing and deliverance? A friend

sent me a column by one of my favorite living people, Garrison Keillor. He writes:

- † “As I write this, the sun is coming up over the Mississippi Valley, and in the orange swashes at the horizon is a long string of clouds that one could imagine are mountains. It rises on people facing challenges beyond anything I’ve known in my rickety life.
- † A beautiful cheerful woman of 26 has been handed a jagged diagnosis of cancer like a big wet albatross on a necklace. A friend struggles with severe depression, slogging through the day, wishing the meds would kick in.
- † And then there is Patrick, whom I met on Saturday, a very bright boy who lies speechless on a gurney, a trach tube in his windpipe, a pump humming softly on a shelf below. His parents explain that he was stricken by a rare neuromuscular disease, and that’s all they say about that. They are both animate, buoyant, jokey, and Patrick smiles and raises hi eyebrows—and suddenly one’s own tiny troubles aren’t worth mentioning.”
- † Back to Moses and God on the mountain. God, responding to Moses’ request for proof of God’s glory, says: “I will make all my goodness pass before you...; and I will be gracious...and merciful...”
- † Gracious and merciful. That is the nature of the God in whom we profess our faith. Garrison Keillor continues: “The existence of human suffering seems to me to affirm the Christian faith. It’s the sacred duty of the faithful to uphold the Patricks of the world and their heroic parents against the prevailing Darwinian forces, but a Patrick shouldn’t be asked to sit by the roadside waiting for a kindly Christian motorist to stop—he is entitled **to mercy** as a basic human right, and

- it is **merciful** of Christians to expect government to carry out this duty.”
- † In the past few weeks, we’ve seen our government try to offer mercy and relief to those affected by the current economic crisis. Some say that most of the relief has gone to the people who put us in this mess in the first place. Others say the blame should be spread around.
 - † Adam Hamilton says: “The underlying causes of the current economic crisis are not financial, but spiritual. At least five of the seven deadly sins came into play: gluttony, greed, sloth, envy, and ultimately pride all came before the fall. These led to absurd economic practices that bordered on the criminal.
 - † It was not simply the CEO’s and Wall Street types who danced to this tune. It was every one of us whose 401K’s prospered by their efforts. And ultimately none of this would be possible without all who abandoned wisdom and prudence and borrowed beyond their capacity to buy houses, cars, and whatever their hearts desired without the ability to repay.”
 - † All around us we see the consequences of the economic downturn, as well as more than enough ordinary human suffering brought on by illness and loss and brokenness. Thank God we can trust in God’s mercy and graciousness, and that our life doesn’t consist in the abundance of possessions.
 - † In the gospel for this week Jesus speaks to a central issue of our lives—just exactly where does our allegiance lie—financial and otherwise? To what seems like a trick question, he wisely replied, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

- † On that ancient denarius that was given to Jesus to trick him was an image of Caesar—inscribed with words that portray Caesar as god—idolatry brought to its essence. Jesus said, in effect, that merely money is owed to the government.
- † But every human being bears the image of God, indelibly stamped on our lives. What if we were to render to God wholly and without condition our entire selves? Surely that is what Jesus did, even unto death on the cross.
- † But like Jesus, our hope lies in a God who will not abandon us, and in a call to repentance before a God who forgives and heals us. It is an invitation to put our *credo*, our belief in God in the midst of a *credit crisis*.
- † That doesn't mean that if we're good Christians God will bless us with economic wealth, although it may happen. But it does mean that when we put God at the center of our lives instead of the things that ultimately do not satisfy and are eaten away by the Dow Jones, we will be rich beyond measure.
- † Where will you place your trust? It's no trick question. Amen.

Sources:

Adam Hamilton, "Credo and the Credit Crisis," www.journeywithjesus.net

Jeanine K. Brown, Commentary on the Gospel, www.workingpreacher.org

Garrison Keillor, "Let the Leader Lead," www.salon.com