
Whose Coins Are In Your Pocket?

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George M. Maxwell, Jr.
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“Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” Matthew 22:18b-19

Have you ever walked away from a conversation wondering about what you should have said? You can't think of what to say while you're in the room, but the perfect response occurs to you after you've gotten to the bottom of the stairs on your way out—after it's too late to use it!

The French call this “staircase wit.”

Lately, I've found myself in a growing number of conversations about religion in which I just don't know what to say.

Sometimes the challenge is how to respond to a bald assertion that religion is unbelievable. A friend of mine recently leaned over the table in the middle of dinner and proclaimed, a bit too eagerly I thought, “Science is developing so fast that in one hundred years there won't be any need for religion!”

Other times the challenge is what to say to one of those confident claims that religion is the source of great violence. Another friend told me some time ago that she was feeling more hopeful about the future as the world became more secular—as if secular was somehow synonymous with safer.

I find these comments remarkably annoying.

I feel like I'm being forced to watch an endless loop of Spencer Tracey playing Clarence Darrow in the 1960's film “Inherit the Wind.” The film, you will remember, is a fictionalized account of the Scopes “Monkey” Trial. In his oft-quoted courtroom scene, Tracey angrily warns the judge that if the religionists get what they want, “We'll be marching backward, backward, though the glorious ages of that Sixteenth Century when bigots burned a man who dared bring enlightenment and intelligence to the human mind.”

I have my stock responses, of course.

I have explained that science and Christianity are not enemies. Science is about how things work. Christianity is about how to value things and what they mean. It's hard, actually, to get very far with one and not need the other.

I have pointed out that Christianity is not hostile to science. Science is, in fact, a child of Christianity. It was born, raised, and sent out into the world with the support of the Christian church and through the efforts of believing Christians. Even the unpleasantness with Galileo was more of dispute among scientists than a battle between science and religion.

I have argued that Christianity is not violent by nature. The heart of Christianity has always been nonviolent. Violence is the product of human tendencies toward prejudice and the pursuit of power. The church has much to confess, no doubt, though it is worth noting that the crusades were defensive in the beginning and the so-called wars of religion in Europe were more a function of emerging states than of established religion.

I am right about these things.

I must confess, though, that I can't remember a time when my stock responses have ever persuaded anyone who didn't already agree with me. Sometimes the conversation gets more heated, and sometimes it just ends. But, after it's all over, I often feel like I'm standing at the bottom of the stairs wondering about what I should have said, how I should have witnessed to my faith.

Jesus, it turns out, has an answer for this tendency. His response to the question about paying the poll tax to Caesar reminds us not only that he always seems to know what to say, but also of how people like me might go about treating our tendencies toward staircase wit.

It's not a friendly conversation, of course. It's a trap. And, Jesus knows it. The Pharisees have already decided to get rid of him. They're just looking for a way to do it.

Their entrapment strategy is elegantly simple. They flatter Jesus by reminding him that he is known for telling the truth regardless of the consequences. Then, they ask him for a legal opinion. Is it lawful to pay the despised tax to Caesar? In other words, is it in line with the Torah? If Jesus says "yes," he will offend the religious authorities. If he says "no," he will offend the political authorities.

Jesus, though, refuses to commit himself. He asks to see the coin used for the tax. The tax must be paid with Roman coin. And, the Roman coin is stamped with the image of Caesar and inscribed with a legend that proclaims him to be the son of a god.

The tables are turned the moment that they produce the coin. It was probably the Herodians who had the coin. They were royalists, who wanted to restore the Judean monarchy, and didn't mind collaborating with the Romans. You do what you've got to do.

The Pharisees were more patriotic Jews. They would have considered even having the coin to have been an act of idolatry. You must be pure. And, to be pure, you must avoid doing anything that signals loyalty to a deity other than God. Carrying around a Roman coin would have been considered to be a violation of the second commandment.

When Jesus says, "Give to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that belong to God," he isn't just showing off his rhetorical skill, or making a philosophical statement about the separation of church and state. It's much more personal than that. He is questioning their loyalties. He is calling them idolaters. He is telling them "to repay the one to whom you are indebted."

So, when I find myself at the bottom of the stairs, wondering about what I should have said, how I should have witnessed to my faith, I think that the Christ is often there too, but asking another question,

"Whose coins are in your pocket?"

That, I think, is the question that Christ is asking,

"Whose coins are in your pocket?"

The images and inscriptions on the metaphorical coins in my pocket reveal the loyalties that I am carrying around. I am embarrassed to tell you what you already know. Usually, most of my loyalties are to me. They are about how to be right, or how to garner your approval. The conversations that I most often find myself revisiting are the ones where my debt to one of these loyalties has not been repaid.

But, sometimes, when I pull the coins out of my pocket, the loyalties are fewer to me than they are to God. Not surprisingly, these are the fierce conversations that have been primarily about how to do the right thing, or how to care for someone else. They are the ones that have the potential to be transforming.

I had some of those over the summer too.

One day, I got a call from our friend, Mariah. Mariah had been diagnosed several years ago, but now things were getting worse, much worse. She called me to ask if I would come talk to her about God. You will get a sense of Mariah, when I tell you that, first, she warned me about her pagan sympathies, and then she told me that she wanted me to tell her about the

“Baby Jesus.”

I know some of you are wondering, so ... yes, I did show Mariah a YouTube video of Ricky Bobby saying the Baby Jesus prayer in “Talladega Nights.” Mariah lived in Montana. She had never seen it before.

For the next several weeks, I sat with Mariah. We talked about what it means to die well. We talked about what it means to say that even death can't separate us from the love of God. We talked about suffering, and we talked about forgiveness.

As others joined us, of course, our conversation often became more about singing, story telling, laughing, and crying.

That's what I remember most, actually—the way that everyone around Mariah leaned into her. There was one point when I counted eighteen people in her hospital room, eighteen people, two guitars and a fiddle.

When it came time for her to go home, we rearranged her house so that it would be the way she wanted it. Several friends donated the time and materials to finish the kitchen remodeling that Mariah has not been able to afford to complete. People brought more food than the refrigerators of the neighborhood could hold.

When I went to see Mariah, more often than not, someone would be sitting on either side of her bed, holding her hands, as if to prevent those things that could not be shared from taking her away too soon.

In the end, we gathered before dawn in her front yard softly singing her over to the next life by the light of candles.

Whose coins are in your pocket?

That's the question that Christ is asking.

Sometimes when we pull the coins out of our pocket, we notice that there are fewer of them bearing our image than there are bearing the image of God. Those are generally the conversations when we find that we are more interested in being present than we are in being right. Those are generally the conversations when we find a way to lean into not knowing what to say, when we realize that sometimes silence can do more of the heavy lifting. Those are generally the conversations that make us realize that, as it turns out, life is a conversation.

And faith? Faith is a knowing that reminds us that we will never be able to repay our debt for having had a real conversation with a friend.

Amen.