

Pentecost 21-October 22, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Matthew 22:15-22

"Intentions" Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from his Son, Jesus Christ. Amen

I like how some other bible versions have translated the beginning of our reading today by saying that the Pharisees met with the Herodians. This introduction sounds harmless and innocent. These two groups had a meeting because they were interested in hearing what Jesus was going to say. We have had good turnouts of people who had the opportunity to hear Pastor Steve Paulson preach at our 150th anniversary of the Nidaros churches. The Hefty Morten Center was nearly filled when V.J. Smith spoke at our inaugural Northern Rim Fundraiser and there was a great showing of people who came here to hear what Coach John Stiegelmier has to say this spring. But what if the keynote speaker was going to be Jesus Christ? The meeting that the Pharisees and Herodians had was to plan what Jesus was going to say, but it was held in the absence of the keynote speaker. In fact, they didn't want him at the meeting. As was plainly described throughout this reading, it was never the intention of this group to learn anything from Jesus. They simply intended to put an end to his ministry by trapping him in his words.

The Pharisees and Herodians never met together regularly. In most cases, they were opponents of each other. It is interesting when something and it is usually a tragedy can cause opposing groups to forget their differences and work together. We saw this after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 or when there are catastrophic weather events. It is then that political parties who are normally at odds join forces and seek to do good. We saw this take place this week when Ben Goehring was killed in a house explosion in rural Humboldt, many farmers got together and had a meeting. People who likely go to different churches and schools and who support different political parties set aside their differences and finished the harvest for the Goehring family. But it also can be the case when opposing groups will put aside their differences to do harm. This was the case with the Pharisees and the Herodians who plotted against Jesus. This story takes place not long before Jesus was crucified. These groups met together without Jesus to form the question that they thought Jesus could not wiggle his way out of and he would be trapped just where they wanted him regardless of if his answer was yes or no.

The Pharisees and the Herodians both were agencies that collected taxes. There was a religious tax due to the Pharisees and the Herodians were a governing group that received taxes to support the Roman government. Both groups by now were feeling threatened by the support that Jesus had gained from people in both of their constituencies. Again, if we were planning an event to highlight the words that Jesus would say, I would hope that the most important topic we could come up with is to Jesus talk about taxes. We could invite a tax specialist from H&R Block or Ness Tax Services if we felt this was a pressing question of concern in our congregation and community. But the Pharisees and Herodians were not looking for information, so asked Jesus a tax question that was intended to trap him in his words.

After first, the spokesperson of this newly formed cohort set the stage by very obviously disingenuously schmoozing Jesus by describing him as a teacher and one who speaks truth and is not swayed by the outward appearance of anything as they set the snare for Jesus. The way they formed the question is even troubling by asking Jesus what he thought. They didn't ask for a citing from scripture to support the answer that he was about to give. They were opening the snare a little wider by asking for his opinion rather

than a definitive answer using the law. So, they dropped the question they came up with at their private meeting. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Jesus knew their intentions were evil. An answer of "yes" by Jesus would be able to make a case against him supporting idolatry. An answer of "no" by Jesus could make a case against him of treason from the Roman government. But Jesus did not give them the satisfaction that they thought would be a sure thing. Instead, Jesus calls them hypocrites and even proves their hypocrisy by asking to see a Roman coin. And it was likely a Pharisee who hoped to catch Jesus by showing loyalty to the image of Caesar, who was the person who pulled a coin out of his pocket with that very image on it. Jesus asked them whose head was on the coin and whose title was on it. There was only one answer to give. The emperors. Then Jesus told them to give to the emperor the things that are his and to God the things that are God's.

What we are told happens next is very interesting. It is equally as interesting that we are not told what Jesus does not do. After this group of people whose intention was to accuse Jesus by what he said, we are told that they left him and went away. Jesus does not call them back to explain his answer. Jesus does not call either one of the normally opposing factions to at least gain the support from one of the sides. Jesus let them leave, because he knew their evil intentions and he knew that at this time their hearts had become hardened, and they really didn't care about what he had to say. They just wanted his ministry to come to an end.

This is not the last of the questions that Jesus will be asked to trap him. In this same chapter in Matthew another group, the Sadducees will ask Jesus the peculiar question that if seven different brothers marry the same women, which brother will be the husband in heaven? The intention of this question is not for helpful information, its only intention was to trap Jesus. And the group that asks this question doesn't even believe in resurrection. But like the Pharisees and the Herodians, the Sadducees want to put an end to Jesus' ministry.

And what is the real reason for their hard-hearted intentions? It is that they have seen Jesus show partiality even though they told him that he doesn't. He has shown obvious partiality for those who have been outcast from society. He has shown partiality to other tax collectors and even made one of them his disciple. He has shown partiality to sinners who know that they are sinners and are eager to hear Jesus declare to them that they are forgiven.

At the end of chapter 22 in Matthew, it is Jesus who asks the final question that silences his opponents for good when he asks them a thinking question like they asked Jesus? Jesus turns the tables on them by asking, what do you think? Whose son is the Messiah? Jesus helps them a little by giving them one option. Is he David's? But if he is David's, how can he also be Lord? They cannot answer and never ask him another question.

The question that the Pharisees and Herodians asked addressed what we are to give and where are we to give it. We would be just as accused and hypocritical if we attempted to answer this question and feel good about what we are giving to others and saving for ourselves what we believe is ours.

But we have not come to hear from Jesus what we are to do. It is not about what we must give. We long to hear from Jesus what he has given to us. Those whose intentions were to accuse, kill and silence Jesus were successful. Successful for three days. But on Easter morning, Jesus left his grave and began to speak again. You have heard today what his intentions are for you. To be given forgiveness and eternal life. Amen