

(Matthew 22:15-22 NRSV)

<sup>15</sup> Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. <sup>16</sup> So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "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. <sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" <sup>18</sup> But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup> Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup> Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" <sup>21</sup> They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." <sup>22</sup> When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

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## What God Do I Treasure

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: Matthew 22:15-22

Recently I have rekindled my interest in chess. It's an old love affair with a game I never was very good at. But I have always appreciated its surprises and its subtlety. In the beginning of one's skill, which is where I mostly stay stuck, the game is straightforward. You learn how to move the pieces, and you try to learn how to avoid stupid blunders, like leaving an important piece unguarded for the taking. But soon enough, one realizes that chess is not so obvious. A move that looks foolish may turn out two moves later, to have been brilliant. An innocent looking move by your opponent may turn out to be a deadly trap. Strategy, keen attentiveness, an ability to see below the surface, beyond the obvious, an ability to bring both discipline and imagination to one's play, and the ability to catch your opponent by surprise and to lure him or her into a trap – these are what make a chess player.

The Herodians and the Pharisees of the New Testament were among the greatest chess players ever. They didn't play a game with 32 pieces on a game board, to be sure. They played a much more deadly game of flesh and blood life in an outpost of the first century Roman Empire. They played a game, though, filled with powerful crowned leaders, lesser nobles and relatively dispensable pawns just as surely as the game of chess is. In the fragile governance of Judea, the locals placed their pieces carefully and calculated their strategies warily, all in hopes of keeping their heads.

The two characters who oppose Jesus in this morning's stories are a Herodian and a Pharisee are interesting pair, a pair with different moves and different motivations, a pair which threaten to squeeze Jesus between them. The Herodians, such as Herod the Great who feared Jesus' birth and sent the wise men after him, owed their position of governance to Rome. They were powerful in Judea, so long as they pleased Caesar in Rome. The Pharisees were in even more of a fragile situation. In a move quite uncharacteristic, Rome allowed the practice of Judaism even as it demanded allegiance to the Divine Emperor. The Pharisees had to walk a very narrow path between toleration by Rome and a more or less open hostility to the worship of the emperor. Staying on the chess board for both the Herodians and Pharisees was a matter of remaining an asset to the Romans, and certainly not becoming a liability.

Evidently, Jesus worried them both. It's not possible to get too precise about the life of Jesus, or even exactly what disturbed his opponents. But given the fact that Jesus was ultimately executed by the Romans, one imagines that the Pharisees and the Herodians were concerned that Jesus was stirring up too much trouble.

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So they paid him a visit. And they engaged him in their game of chess. They had a strategy calculated to perfection. I get the idea that Judea was about as happy about taxes as the state of New Hampshire is. So they asked him what was meant to look like an innocent question: "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.<sup>17</sup> Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" They moved the chess piece in place. They insisted it was just an innocent move. But it was designed to be what in chess is called a fork leading to mate in two moves. No matter which way Jesus moved, the Pharisees and the Herodian had designed it to cost him the game. Should he say that he thought Caesar's tax was unlawful, the Herodian would find him a traitor to the empire. If he answered that he thought Caesar's tax was good and lawful, the Pharisees would find him a heretic. Either way, the next move was checkmate.

But Jesus turns out to be a better chess player than either of his opponents. Like the great grand masters, he takes what looks like a fatal position, sidesteps the trap, and springs one of his own.

Grant Gallup an Episcopal Priest who preaches in Managua, Nicaragua tells the story this way:

Jesus is aware of their malice, for their purpose is to trip him up. Jesus knows his, and says, "Why put me to the test? Am I the issue?" "Show me your money," Jesus said. "Show me what you got." And the Pharisees and the Herodians, the ones who supported the imperial Herod, whom they knew, rather than the Messiah of God, whom they didn't know, timidly showed to Jesus what it was they were dealing in. All they had in their pockets were coins issued by the State, with Caesar's image on them. The currency of the world around them. The stock-in-trade of the bribe and the world market. The wealth of the empire in which they supposedly had no faith, as dissenters from imperial hegemony. "Whose picture is on this money?" Jesus asked. "In whose image and likeness is this issued? What God does it honor?" And it could not have been at the tops of their voices, but in shy and boyish whispers that they responded, taming their sibilants: "Caesar's." A nuisance, an inconvenience, a peccadillo perhaps, to have such coins folded in their robes. For a Pharisee to pull out such a coin was like extracting a pork chop from your hand bag in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. In Jesus' lifetime the coins were engraved with the words, "Divine" and "Pontifex Maximus" around the profile of the Emperor Tiberias.

And Jesus the good Jew, his hands clasped behind his back and bending over to peer ironically at the little metal idol in the palm of the Churchman, giggled and

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said: “Oh, dear! Give it back! Give back to Caesar what has Caesar’s picture on it! And give back to God what is God’s.”<sup>1</sup>

The Pharisee and the Herodian are stunned. Jesus has avoided the trap. He has told them both what they want to hear, or so it seems. They stand there dumbfounded because the rude Galilean peasant has beat them at their own game. He solved the trap with an ingenious move. Ever since that day, the move has been known as that great American dictum of the separation of church and state, the separation of the religious and the secular. “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and unto God, that which is God’s.” The Herodian politician and the religious leader are fooled and surprised by Jesus’ ingenuity, but in the end they are happy enough with the results. Maybe Jesus has even put to words the way they understood their uneasy coexistence to work. Let Caesar deal with the things of the world and let God deal with the things of heaven, or the temple, or the church, or the spiritual. The Herodian and the Pharisee could leave the conversation assured that the position on the chessboard was a benign and an unthreatening draw.

But, of course, the Herodian and the Pharisee had not understood the full depth of Jesus’ move. The most skilled chess masters make a brilliant and surprising move; it is an escape from danger; it leaves the opponent reeling at the getaway; but lo and behold, it is not just a getaway. The move not only escapes danger, but it also leads to checkmate, game over. Here in today’s story we get a poignant glimpse of what we celebrate each Easter, of Jesus’ great ability to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

Listen again to the move that Jesus made. Remember we have Jesus rather innocently clapping his hand behind his back peering over the chessboard, peering at the coins, the idols the Pharisee and the Herodian showed him. And he giggled and said,

“Oh, dear! Give it back! Give back to Caesar what has Caesar’s picture on it! And give back to God what has God’s picture on it.” And what has God’s picture on it? What has God’s image imprinted upon it? What was created in the image of God? And suddenly the Pharisee, and even the Herodian, stop in their tracks. Give back to God what has God’s image engraved on it. Give back to God your very self. Give back your humanity, your being! Give back to God your soul! Give back to God your body! You are made in the image and likeness of God. You are God’s coinage, with God’s image and likeness stamped thereon, and marked “Pontifex.” Give all if it back to God!<sup>2</sup>

Checkmate. The game’s over.

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from “Homily Grits,” by Gant Gallup.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid

At the end of the day, what belongs to Caesar is not much in the scheme of things. And yet nation after nation has sought to equate the face of their aspirations with the face of God. They would have done better to do it the other way around. They would have done better to let the face of God mediate their aspirations – the face of God in the story of the Good Samaritan, the face of God in the Sermon on the Mount, the face of God seen in the feeding of the multitude.

The "throne and altar" theology of Christians in the past led civilizations into the blasphemous belief that national goals were identical with God's purposes. Constantine the Emperor, the Holy Roman Empire's crusades, the papal states, the English Church under Henry VIII, the bishop-burning church of Cromwell, the witch-burning Church of Puritan New England, the German Christians of Hitler's Reich, the Anti-Religion of the Soviets. And now us. Now us.<sup>3</sup>

In another place Jesus says, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be, also." I must ask myself every day, every hour of every day, Is it God's face or is it "Divine" Caesar's face which is carved into what I most treasure? Which God has my heart? To which God do I give over all that I am? Which God has my soul? And I know in my heart of hearts that there is only one answer which will really do. For the only acceptable answer was imprinted upon my very form at the hour of creation. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid