

21st Sunday after Pentecost (Pr. 24A)
Matthew 22:15-22

October 18, 2026
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supply for Trinity, N. Bethesda

Power can be addictive.

And money?

Money is simply

...power...in a transferable form.

More money means more power,

means greater influence and

and greater ability to affect change.

Yes, money and power together make for

a very formidable...and addictive combination.

Even good people with good intentions can be seduced by it.

And I have to imagine,

most people, most groups,

most corporations, institutions, nations,...

religions even,

once they attain great power,

well,...they will do almost anything to hold onto it.

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In the first century

the Roman Empire was the most powerful nation in the world.

Every land it conquered fell under its power and

that of its Caesar,

whom the Romans believed was the Son of the Divine,

and their Lord.

In the name of that Divine Caesar and under the banner of his image,

Rome wielded power,

over its subjects and slaves and occupied territories.

Rome did so by propagating fear and using brutal force.

Rome had the largest, best equipped, best trained army in the world.
Rome would occupy a nation or territory,
capture or kill its leader
and replace them with one of their own officials.
If any one dared to resist Rome,
Rome would publicly execute the resistor
by hanging them on a cross,
along the roadways leading into
the conquered nation's capital.

Yes, Rome was extremely powerful.

At the crossroads of the Roman Empire's trading routes
was a little strip of land, a not so powerful nation called Israel.
Roman economic interests dictated that Israel
be occupied and remain under Rome's power and control,
so that Rome could protect its valuable trade routes.

Obviously the citizens of Israel did not welcome Rome's occupation
nor the power Rome held over them.

Some Israelites,
especially religious leaders like the Pharisees,
begrudgingly tolerated Rome's occupation.

Some Israelites cozied up to their Roman occupiers,
politicking for preferential treatment and access to power.
Chief among these were the Herodians.

As long as the Pharisees and Herodians kept the people in line
Rome would leave the Israelites alone,
free to practice their religion.

Under this arrangement
both the Herodians and Pharisees
enjoyed access to power.
And, having attained such power,
they would do almost anything to hold onto it.

Then, along came this itinerant preacher, miracle worker, prophet, Jesus.
Jesus, who just the day before the events of our gospel reading for today,
this Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey,
greeted by people lining the streets and chanting:
“Hosanna, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

That chant is the exact wording used by Romans
when they line the streets to greet their Caesar
as he returns from battle victorious,
riding upon his war horse.

On the same day as his triumphal entry,
Jesus visited the great Temple and
there caused quite a commotion,
flipping tables and driving out moneychangers
and reclaiming the Temple as a House of Prayer.

Remember,
as long as the Pharisees and Herodians kept the people in line
Rome would leave the Israelites alone.

But, suddenly,
all of Jerusalem was in turmoil
over this Jesus whose actions
had certainly angered the religious authorities
and surely must have drawn the attention
of Rome and its sycophants.

Suddenly this Jesus was a threat.
Jesus was putting at risk,
the power the Pharisees, Herodians and Rome
held over the people.

So, even though they didn't really like each other,
the Pharisees and the Herodians teamed up.
In Jesus, they had a common enemy,

and they would just have to tolerate each other long enough to deal
decisively with him.

That's where the action picks up
in today's gospel reading,
with Jesus back in the Temple,
teaching the crowds
and healing those who were sick.

The Pharisees and Herodians
determined to undermine Jesus popular power,
attempt to put him in a bind,
by asking him a question
which is difficult to answer without
angering either the Pharisees,
or the Herodians,
or the people.

"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"
they ask him.

But, Jesus, recognizing their malice and the politics they are playing,
Jesus, who knows the Pharisees and Herodians
enjoy holding power over the people,

Jesus, who is in the first days of this first Holy Week,
and who knows where this week ends,
Jesus takes their question and
like the tables he had flipped in the Temple,
Jesus with his brilliant and revealing answer,
flips the world upside down.

Taking a coin of the Roman Empire,
Jesus points to the image of the Caesar which the coin bears,
and says simply,

"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's,
and to God the things that are God's"

In other words,
Give the emperor his due —

and do the same for God!
Give the emperor the things that bear his image —
And give to God the things that bear the image of God.

And, what bears God's image?
We human beings, of course,
and in fact the whole created universe
reveals the image of God.

Give the emperor his due,
a limited value and power contained in this trinket of a coin.

After all, empires are self limiting.

Empires will come and go.

Their power is fleeting.

But, "the things that bear the image of God"
together are much bigger, much more valuable
and much more powerful.

They are unlimited and eternal.

Is it lawful to obey the emperor? Sure.

Is it lawful to hold brutal power over people?

Not at all!

How much more lawful is it to share power

as we seek to obey the God of love, justice, and mercy?

To use our shared power to care for the least of these,
the most vulnerable of our neighbors?

So, go ahead...

flip the tables.

Flip the power paradigm from
power over to power with,
from power to rule
to power to serve.

This is the way of Jesus,
the Divine Son of God, our Lord.

This is the way of his cross.

This is the way of God's beloved community,
the way
to an equitable, just, shared life for all.