

Sunday October 22nd, 2023

Proper 24

Matthew 22:15-22

“Whose Image is on You?”

There was a church where the preacher, and the minister of music, were not getting along. As time went on, this hostility began to spill over into the church service with the minister of music making life difficult for the preacher. One week the minister preached about commitment, and how we should dedicate ourselves to God. The music director led the final hymn in response to the message with, “I Shall Not Be Moved.”

The next week the preacher preached on tithing, and how we should gladly give to the work of the Lord. The music director led the song, “Jesus Paid It All.” The next week the minister preached on the evils of gossiping, and how we should all watch our tongues. To which the music director led in response, “I Love to Tell the Story.”

With all this going on, the preacher became totally disgusted over the situation, and the following Sunday told the congregation that he was considering resigning. To which the music director led, “Oh, Why Not Tonight?” As it came to pass, the preacher did resign. The next week he informed the church that it was Jesus who led him there, and it was Jesus who was taking him away. To which the Music director led, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

One of the phrases that were being bandied about every time we have a federal election is the concept of “hidden agenda”. I take this phrase “hidden agenda” used in the recent elections, to mean that people believed that one or maybe all the political leaders, and their parties, told the public one thing, but secretly had other plans that they would carry out if elected. These secret plans, it seems, are such that they would be received negatively if the voting public knew about them in advance of the polls.

The problem with hidden agendas is that, well, they are hidden if they exist at all. Sometimes we can tell what someone’s hidden agenda is, like the music director in the little story trying to force the minister out, but other times we are not so sure. It is also very difficult, as Premier Doug Ford’s experience proves, for someone who is accused of having a hidden agenda, to prove that they do not possess such a thing. How do you prove you don’t have something that is by nature a secret?

The truth is, however, that people do, by their own human nature, have hidden agendas. In most of our encounters with each other, even in the church, we all secretly want to achieve something of benefit to ourselves, or to those we represent. There is in most of our human interactions a seething undercurrent of suspicion, and even hostility, because we assume we are not being given the whole story or are being sold a bill of goods.

People will do almost anything if it leads to some sort of personal gain. Who Cheats? Well, just about anyone, if the stakes are right. As Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner, authors of the wonderful book *Freakonomics*, point out, “*You might say to yourself, I don’t cheat, regardless of the stakes. And then you remember the time you cheated, say in a board game.*”

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Or the golf ball you nudged out of its bad lie. Or the time you really wanted a bagel in the office break room but couldn't come up with a dollar you were supposed to drop in the coffee can. And then you took the bagel anyway. And told yourself you'd pay double the next time. And didn't." (Freakonomics pg. 24)

Some cheating barely leaves a shadow of evidence. In other cases, the evidence is massive, such as what occurred in 1987 when seven million American children suddenly disappeared. What happened? Was it some terrible plague or natural disaster? Well, all that happened was that the IRS simply made a rule change in how dependent children could be claimed on one's income taxes.

Children being claimed as dependents now had to have a Social Security number, so suddenly, seven million phantom children claimed the year before as dependents, disappeared. So, we all have hidden agendas, managed by cheating, lying, flattery, and a whole host of other tools. So, when I read this story of Jesus being questioned by his critics, I may be disappointed, but I am hardly surprised.

The Pharisees had been scheming for months to get rid of Jesus, and they believed they had finally come up with an ingenious plan; or at least they thought so. Sending their disciples, along with some Herodians (these being monarchist who fought to keep Herod on the throne) they came to trap Jesus. First, they used a typical strategy; they try and flatter Jesus by stating how honest Jesus is, and how Jesus speaks the truth regardless of the fall out.

I am sure we all have had someone approach us and try and butter us up before asking for something. Like, "Gee Mommy you look pretty today. And by the way pretty mommy, can I have a cookie?" These Pharisee "wanna-be's" are hypocrites. They are being two faced. They neither think Jesus is any kind of teacher worthy of their respect, nor do they seek an answer of any value. They are seeking to trap him. So, they ask their slippery question, "Is it right to pay taxes to the Roman government or not?"

If Jesus said that it was not right to pay taxes, then the Herodians would report Jesus to the Romans as being subversive or a Zealot. If Jesus said that it was lawful, then the people who hated the Romans would turn against Jesus for being in compliance with their occupiers. We read further that Jesus saw through this trick, and answered by taking a coin and asking his famous question, "Whose picture is on the coin?"

It was Caesars of course, and Jesus goes on to say that people should "give to Caesar what belongs to him. But everything that belongs to God must be given to God." The scriptures tell us that the Pharisee's disciples, and the Herodians were amazed at his reply and went away. They went away because their hidden agenda failed. Now one thing about this passage that has bothered me for some time is how we use it in the modern church.

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I am sure that all of us, who have been a part of the church for some time, have heard sermons based on this passage, that speak to the rightful relationship between secular government and religion. In other words, some people try to use this passage to say that Jesus was making a political statement.

Perhaps you have even thought this passage has something to say about whether paying taxes is Christian thing to do. I, however, see this passage as speaking to something else, at least as I approach it this time. Regardless of the financial implications of this passage, I think it has more to say about our own hidden agendas than taxation. Jesus used the word "*hypocrite*" to describe the hearts of those who questioned him.

I also think that an appropriate word to describe their hearts is "*disingenuous*", meaning insincere or lacking frankness. Both disingenuous and hypocrisy speak to the human trait of being two faced. We all know what this means. Clearly it means that we are saying one thing, but really believe, or feel differently. Jesus was clearly offended by his critics' disingenuous words and hearts.

The issue here isn't taxes or coins, but rather the condition of our hearts. All of us have been frustrated by disingenuous people. We have all experienced people expressing thoughts, or feelings, we know are more show than substance. We regularly ask someone how they are doing, only to have them say "I'm okay", when you can see from their eyes, or body language, that they are nowhere near being okay.

What is a very curious development in our society is that when someone is frank and honest with us, we would prefer them to go back to being disingenuous. The late comedian Don Rickles is known as the king of put-downs. In Las Vegas, people regularly flocked to his show, not only to see him, but to become part of his routine. One evening, Rickles was thirty minutes into his act when a man and woman were escorted to the front row.

Rickles stopped and acknowledged the couple's entrance with, "Hey, Mr. and Mrs. Hockey Puck, you're thirty minutes late." The man immediately shot back, "No, we're early. You're still on." Rickles literally dropped to his knees laughing, and the crowd gave the man a standing ovation. Frankness may be funny, but still, hypocrisy reigns in our world. The hidden agendas in our hearts always trump what is right, good, or true.

I think that perhaps we have been just as disingenuous with Jesus as these critics were. Perhaps we too approach him with great flattery, while all the while questioning his goodness. Perhaps, we have offered lip service to the principles of faith Christ espoused, only to go about secretly behaving as if Jesus has made no difference in our lives at all. Perhaps, we have even been like those in the story today and gone to great lengths to phrase tricky excuses as to why we don't believe in God or follow Jesus.

Every time I hear skeptics dragging out centuries old issues that they believe question the goodness of God, or even his very existence, I know for the most part it is disingenuous.

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It is disingenuous, because often it is not an answer they seek, but rather excuses to avoid confronting their own lostness. That's the true hidden agenda in this passage, and in all our lives; our desire to avoid, or distance ourselves from Christ.

We need to ask ourselves a very hard question today. Am I preserving an authentic relationship with Christ, or simply preserving the appearance of a relationship? I am sure you would agree with me that there is a world of difference. Tony Campolo tells the story about a church service in a charismatic church where a woman stood up in the middle of the proceedings. She claimed to have a word of prophecy. She stood in a trancelike state, and when she spoke, an unnatural, heavy voice came out of her.

Everyone waited with intense anticipation, as she said boldly, "Thus saith the Lord... even as Moses led the animals into the ark, even so shall I lead my people to safety, if they trust me." All through the congregation people leaned over to one another and whispered, "Did she say Moses? I think she said Moses!" After delivering what was supposed to be a direct message from the Lord, the woman sat down.

Then a couple of minutes later she stood up again. And again, supposedly in a trance, she belted out, "Thus saith the Lord...it wasn't Moses, it was Noah!" The whole place then erupted in giggles. So, I wonder; what was she giving evidence to? None of us but the Lord himself knows this woman's true heart, but to the casual observer, we instinctively know something is amiss in her faith.

I have thought about a certain question for a long time; what exactly does God want from his people? I hope it is a question you have asked yourself frequently as well. Quite often the extent of my spiritual introspection centers on what I need to do at any moment, or in the face of a particular set of circumstances. We have even seen a whole industry built around the question, "What would Jesus do?"

And so, people took to wearing T-shirts, and bracelets, with the bold letters "WWJD" inscribed on them, in the hopes of being reminded, and reminding others that their first duty to Christ was to do as he did. Certainly, no one should be discouraged from following Jesus' example; that is not what I am getting at. But is the sum of our faith; nothing more than simply doing Christ like things.

To me it is just as disingenuous to say to Jesus "look at what I have done", as it was to flatter him to trap him in a tricky question. I think, what Jesus is looking for is an authentic relationship with his followers; followers, who don't resort to trying to manipulate Jesus into liking them. Rather, followers who live in the assurance of Jesus' love. Jesus wants followers who are honest with him about their faults, struggles, and doubts; and yet continue the faith journey anyway.

There is no hidden agenda with Jesus. He is the "Way, the Truth and the Life", and he will always tell you the truth about yourself and this world. Jesus refuses to play politics with faith, by trying to flatter you into the Kingdom, or by making the way to life wide because he states it is narrow.

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And because Jesus was so forthright in his actions, and his words, and because he refused to play politics, he was eventually executed.

Truthful faith is costly. Centuries of church history have proven that to be true. But being disingenuous or hypocritical in one's faith can be even costlier, as we run the danger of having Christ say to us "depart from me, for I never knew you." And to be honest I would far rather be known by Christ, than by anything, or anyone else in this world.