

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Matthew 22:15-22 I Peeked

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Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 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." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away."

Notice anything different? Okay, besides the haircut, anything? Nope. Well, I'm glad it's not noticeable . . . At my recent annual physical I learned that I am a half an inch shorter this year than I was last year. Yep, half an inch. Now I know that some loss of height is a natural part of the aging process but come on, I'm only 33 years old. At the rate of half an inch a year, if I live another 50 years, I'll be three feet four inches tall when I die!

That being said, my doctor assured me that I'm too young to be shrinking. She suggested that perhaps the problem was my inability to stand up straight. And why am I unable to stand up straight? I cannot stand up straight because, well, I peeked. That's right. Even though experts and trusted friends told me not to, I peeked. I just couldn't help it. I opened up my pension statement and I peeked—thousands of dollars down the drain. I opened up Nathan's 529 college savings account statement, I would have done better had I been stuffing money in his little frog-shaped bank. Each time I peeked, my shoulders got a little more tense and my head hung a little bit lower. I can't stand up straight because my muscles are all tied up in knots of worry and anxiety about money. And I know I'm not alone. Another one of you self-confessed peekers told me that you lost \$7000 in the course of 24 hours last week. I wonder, are you shrinking too?!?!

The stress of this situation, the fact that news of the tanking economy leads almost every news show and newspaper headline, it's really getting to me. I have to catch myself and remember that they're only talking about money. Now don't get me wrong, these are real financial problems with real consequences for real people—people like you and like me. However, it is important to remember that the stock market or our portfolios or our gains and losses are NOT us. They affect us, sometimes in very dire ways. Some folks are losing health insurance, others are losing their homes, still others are losing their jobs. But the truth of the matter is that, the day my fellow peeker peeked and discovered that he lost \$7000 in the course of 24 hours, life hadn't really changed all that much between the minute before he peeked and the minute after he peeked. He was in just as robust health after he peeked as before he peeked. He and his wife were just as much in love before he peeked as after he peeked. The trees in his yard were in just as brilliant shades of color, the deer in his lawn were grazing just as gracefully and peacefully, and the clouds dancing across the sky were just as white and billowy after he peeked as they were before he peeked. And, most importantly, my fellow peeker is just as much a beloved child of God, disciple of Christ, and treasured member of this church after he peeked as he was before he peeked.

But it seems most of our society would have us believe otherwise. They would have us believe that, if the world is not actually crumbling, it's close to it. But their world—the world of stock markets and bail outs and corporate greed—that's not our world, is it? It's obvious that we're not immune from it for surely it is part of the world in which we live. But while it may be part of our lives it is not, when all is said and done, the sum whole of our lives. For the reality of the situation is that if you have \$7000 to lose in 24 hours, you were pretty blessed in the first place. If I have a pension account, I'm pretty blessed. If I even have a child, forget about his 529 account, I am blessed beyond measure. And yet, there are those forces in this world that would have me believing otherwise; \ those forces are trying to keep me scared, make me feel desperate, those forces are trying to trick me into putting my faith in the almighty dollar rather than putting my faith in the almighty Lord.

You know, it's not unlike how the Pharisees were treating Jesus—thinking they could trick him and get him to bow to the power of almighty Caesar. The Pharisees ask Jesus a question that puts him between a rock and a hard place. In what I can only imagine were Eddie Haskell-like brown-nosing, sarcastic voices they said, “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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” If Jesus says yes, that it's lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, then he will alienate many of his Jewish followers who abhor paying what was essentially a head tax to the Roman government, a government that occupied the Jewish homeland and treated the people poorly. On the other hand, if Jesus answers no, that it is not lawful to pay the tax, it would make him subject to arrest by the Romans.¹ The religious leaders know there's no good answer he can give. And yet, Jesus gives them a good answer. “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, ‘Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?’ ‘Caesar’s,’ they replied. Then he said to them, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.’

Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s. Caesar had commissioned the making of the coin used for paying the tax. He had his image put on it along with the words, “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest”. Jesus says yeah, give to Caesar what is Caesar, pay the tax with the coin with the picture of Caesar on it. But he also said, “Give to God, what is God’s.” Hmmm. Give to God, what is God’s. This one, perhaps, not quite so easy. We don’t have any coins or bills with pictures of God on them. We don’t have checks or money orders imprinted with God’s profile. A coin with Caesar’s image, easy. Giving to God what is God’s . . . not so much.

Unless, of course, you take seriously the words from the book of *Genesis* Dick read this morning. While we may have no coins sporting the image on God, we do have ourselves who were “[C]reated in God’s image, in the image of God they were created; male and female God created them.” If the coin created in Caesar’s image is what we are to give to Caesar, then our own selves, who are created in the image of God, are nothing less than what we are to give to God. What is Caesar’s are the things of this world—we give to this world the things of this world. What is God’s are the things of God’s world. And yet, though we are of God and are God’s, we are also living under the kings of this world—stock market declines, foreclosures, job losses—we live with the stress and anxiety that comes when we peek into this world of lost opportunities and broken dreams BUT we also live in the world of the peace that passes understanding when we peek into God’s kingdom.

Now I know that I’m also not alone when I confess that I’ve peeked and seen the kingdom. Some of us peeked and stumbled upon the kingdom yesterday at our blessing of the pets. The joy of the kingdom was present on a crisp autumn morning amidst the deafening barks of dogs. I know that each one of us there better understands unconditional love, the love that rules the kingdom of God, because we have these dogs that love us no matter what. I know that Darcy, one of our new members, peeked at the kingdom when some of you so generously provided her with meals when her mother was in the hospital. She kept saying, “But I’m just a new member, but I’m just a new member.” In receiving that kindness, Darcy glimpsed the inclusivity of the kingdom, a place where “the last shall be first and the first shall be last.” Some of us were seeking the kingdom and found it when we peeked in on the life of a young, single mom escaping a dysfunctional and verbally abusive home situation. When volunteers stepped up to help, no one judged that mom, no one held her past mistakes against her. Instead, everyone rallied to help someone in need and as we did we glimpsed a kingdom in which people leave the judgment up to God and focus instead on seeking out folks who need help.

Friends, I’m not going to beat around the bush on this one, the earthly treasures, and specifically your money, are, in many cases, what make it possible for us and others to peek and glimpse the kingdom of God. Without this church, whose sole source of financial support is your generous financial tithes and gifts, without this church, none of the previous examples would have happened. When God created us in God’s own image, God took a huge risk and in

¹ M. Eugene Boring, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VIII, pg. 420.

creating us in God's own image, created us with the ability to choose right and wrong, to choose love or hate, to choose the powers of this world or the powers of God's kingdom. Whenever I think of God creating us with the ability to choose, I get this image of God, sitting in the front row of a school room, with an arm in the air vibrating with enthusiasm saying "pick me, pick me, pick me" while in the seat beside God are the powers of this world, menacingly staring us down warning, "You better pick me, or else." Right now, it's mighty tempting to bow to the powers of this world, the ones saying "You better pick me, or else" because we're so afraid of the "or else" and want to squirrel away our money until a brighter day. Trust me, I get that, I understand that temptation. And yet, if we do that, if we act in fear, if we give into the temptation, I really do believe that we'll be peeking at the kingdom of God far less often.

As we make choices about how to spend our earthly treasure in these tough financial times, I hope we'll call on the enthusiastic diety in the front row and forego a few of the regular indulgences—a night out on the town, an extended vacation, a home renovation, those new shoes, a costly bottle of wine—I hope that if the choice is between these earthly pleasures and supporting the mission and ministry of our church, I hope we'll choose the church. And of course there are some of you who have already foregone the luxuries and the extras and you're just trying to keep your house and pay your bills. For you, we know that you're focused on just making it day to day. We understand that and while you're getting back on your feet, those of us who can will try to give a little more. Know that we're praying for you and trusting that you're doing all you can.

Friends, I know we'll survive this financial crisis, but I don't want to be the pastor of the church that survived, I want to be the pastor of the church that thrived. I want to be the pastor of the church folk who, in the midst of hard times, banded together to give of their time, talent, and treasure because they choose to peek in on the kingdom instead of bowing to the powers of this world, the folks who responded to God's plea—pick me, pick me, pick me. And the thing of it is, I don't want to just be the pastor of that church, I realize that I am the pastor of that church and so with total confidence in God, and trust in each other, I know we'll weather this storm and we'll continue to peek in on the kingdom. And as we do so, we'll all grow in faith and understanding, myself included. And you'll know that I have because, when I stand before on the third Sunday of October in the year of our Lord 2009, I will be restored to my full 5 feet, 7 inches, able to stand tall with the certain confidence that in the kingdom of God, in the words of the great Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich, all shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.