

The Flip of a Coin
Matthew 22:15-22
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And in the category of “Did you Know?” comes this little historical curiosity: that the tradition of flipping a coin, as in “heads you win, tails you lose,” dates back to Julius Caesar, who often struggled with making the right decision. Since his own head was on one side of every Roman coin, it was “heads” that determined the winner in each flip. People thought “heads” meant that Caesar agreed with the decision. And believe it or not, the humble coin flip was even used in serious litigation involving property, marriage and even criminal guilt. Yikes.

That’s a pretty interesting fact in light of Jesus’ encounter with some disciples of the Pharisees, and some Herodians on that question of paying taxes. Caesar was born some one hundred years before Jesus, so it just may be that when Jesus asks those hypocrites for a coin, he has them thinking that he is going to flip it to give them an answer. After all, why not use an emperor’s method for an imperial question? And it would have been an easy dodge for Jesus to make, right? He could just attribute the answer to Caesar and wash his hands of the matter! But of course, he took the more courageous and ultimately helpful path and left us with his pithy saying, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and God what is God’s.”

Of course, it wasn’t the original Julius Caesar who was in power when Jesus is asked this question but rather the Emperor Tiberius, and likely it was his image

and title that appeared on the denarius Jesus asked for that day. Unfortunately for the Jews, although the original intent of the coin flip was “heads you win, tails you lose,” for certain sectors of the populace, the reality was more like, “heads I win, tails you lose,” so total was the control of the Roman Empire. It was that reality that brought those Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus, each group jockeying for position in the drama that was the occupation of Israel. The Herodians represented those who had accommodated with the Empire, and were trying to make the best of a bad situation. They of course wanted Jesus to say that paying the tax was OK. The Pharisees were looking to make the case for opposing Rome and they hoped Jesus would strengthen that case by making it look like a religious virtue to avoid the idolatry of using a coin with another god’s head printed on it, because that is what the Emperor was considered to be, a god. Neither side was really going to change the overall situation very much, but that is where they had decided to stake their claims, and they would need all the support they could get.

And so the Pharisees and Herodians are there like the captains of two teams in American football at the fifty-yard line before the sudden death overtime period, seeing who will seize the advantage. You see, the possession of the ball in overtime is determined by the flip of a coin and the team that wins that toss has a much greater chance of winning the game, since they get the ball first. And there’s Jesus, like a referee in zebra stripes with a coin in his hand, turning it over and over in his fingers, looking at it, maybe even tossing it up and down in one hand. Maybe

he really was thinking about actually flipping it, just to yank their chains, we'll never know. Maybe he's thinking that the options before his people were kind of a meaningless coin flip for the people in Jesus time, that they were stuck between that proverbial between a rock and hard place. Either you collaborated with the Empire and paid a price, or you opposed the empire and paid a price. But either way, they were over-focused on the Empire and under-focused on God, and that is why they had asked him such a stupid question.

And so Jesus does the verbal equivalent of the mother of all coin flips, the one that if you were filming it for a movie goes something like this: Jesus looks from side to side, readies the coin in his fingers, and gives it a mighty flip. And the coin rises up in the air, in slow motion of course, and everyone is looking at it as it disappears into the bright sun, and they are all breathlessly waiting for it to come back down and reveal the winner. Only it never does. It never comes back down. Nobody knows just what's happened to it, but it begins to dawn on them that it has been snatched from the air by the very hand of God. And they realize that they've now been staring up at heaven longer than they have in a long time, and that heaven's a good place to fix your gaze, and when they finally look down, Jesus, along with the coin, are long gone.

Did it happen that way? Of course not, but Jesus' answer aims at the same effect: to turn their hearts away from thoughts of the power of the Empire toward faith in the one with more power than ten thousand empires. For far too long the

two factions been stuck staring each other down with one eye while keeping the other eye on the Empire. That doesn't leave a lot of eyes left to look to the one who really could have done something about what troubled them in the first place, or at those around them who really mattered in God's eyes. If we ever wonder why Jesus was so popular, all we have to remember is this fruitless preoccupation with the Emperor instead of a fruitful commitment to the Omnipotent.

This wasn't the first time God's people got stuck. In the Men's Bible Study the last few weeks, we have been taking a look at the slender book of Habakkuk, that Old Testament prophet most famous for the phrase, "The righteous shall live by faith." Habakkuk comes from another period of our history when our spiritual ancestors were also caught between a rock and hard place. Like the Jews of Jesus' time, the people of Judah were caught up in a struggle against Empire, only this time it was the Babylonian Empire. And even though they had been thoroughly warned that the destruction of their nation was inevitable, because it was dictated by God, they still thought they could prevent it by resorting to the same old tricks as always, like making alliances with whichever neighboring country could bail them out. And so they went back and forth between the Egyptians and the Babylonians, and for all intents and purposes, flipping that coin between those two powers, instead of looking up to the God who really had all the power.

And so Habakkuk questions God about what seems quite unfair to him, the coming destruction of his own nation at the hands of an even more wicked nation.

He asks, “O Lord, how long shall I cry out for help, and you will not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?” He too is flipping his coin, with one side of it continued suffering, and the other side a quick death at the hand of a God made angry by impertinent questions. It is going to be bad either way. But God catches that coin in midair, and raises Habakkuk’s eyes heavenward with the divine answer: “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.” And that answer, that invitation to trust in God and focus on what really matters seems to cause a profound change in Habakkuk. He goes from the despair of his initial question to rejoicing in the book’s final words, “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.” Quite a turnaround, I’d say, brought about by turning his eyes heavenward.

There are so many conflicted situations in the world, and in our families and workplaces that feel stuck, that seem like contests we are willing to settle with one of these pointless flips of a coin, only if we really did, the outcomes really don’t

get us any farther ahead. One nation wins a battle, the other loses and digs in for an even longer war. How is that any better? One spouse wins an argument and the other becomes even more bitter and withdrawn? How is that any better? One side in a labor dispute wins a court case and the other side walks off the job or locks out the workers. How is that any better? In the famous words of Rodney King, “Can’t we all just get along?” No, Rodney, we can’t, if we keep focusing on the wrong thing. It almost goes without saying that the Pharisees and the Herodians had a lot more in common with each other than either did with the Romans, and yet there they were coming to Jesus to get him involved in their pointless dispute, not because he was the Son of God, but because they wanted one more influential person on their side. And in his wonderful way, he reminds them that both sides already have everything they need to change the way they did business with the Empire. They had everything they needed, even before Jesus, to bring down the Empire. They were just too stuck in old ways to practice what God had always preached to them: that doing justice, and loving mercy, and walking humbly with your God can bring any empire to its knees. Ask Gandhi. Ask King. Ask Mandela or Tutu.

At the same time, we would miss the point if we thought that Jesus’ approach was just another strategy for overcoming an empire. Every empire is replaced by the next. And we would also miss the point if we thought it was just a way of coping, of getting by. But it is neither. No, Jesus directs our eyes

heavenward because that is the only way to transform those conflicted, or hopeless, or despairing situations into something that reflects what God has in mind for us, something of what we've been promised, and for what we hold out hope. Turning our eyes heavenward is where we find dignity and courage, creativity and imagination, community and call, those vital elements of what it means to be fully human that not only help us survive our broken relationships or our economically devastated communities or our bouts with depression or addiction, but to bless others even in the midst of dealing with our own stuff. God knows we are more than the challenges we face.

There's a story from apartheid South Africa about the time when Bishop Desmond Tutu was walking by a construction site on a temporary sidewalk the width of one person, and a white man appeared at the other end, recognized Tutu, and said, "I don't give way to gorillas." At which point, Tutu stepped aside, made a deep sweeping gesture, and said, "Ah yes, but I do." But don't think for a minute that Tutu did that only as a means of bringing down the regime, or only getting through with his own dignity intact. No, Tutu's faith compelled him to do what he did because he loved that man standing in front of him as much as he loved himself, and that's a place you can't get to if you are only focusing on the conflict between you. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.

Maybe there's a situation in your life in which you've been focusing on the wrong thing, even though the right thing is oh so near? Has it been a problematic

relationship with a family member or co-worker, instead of your relationship with God? Has it been with your own efforts at thriving, when it could be with others surviving? Has it been a focus on a cure, a magic bullet, a quick fix, at the expense of a profound healing and coming to terms with what is, and what is surely coming? We all get stuck sometimes. And when we're stuck we feel that the odds are against us, that there's no way we have even a chance at "heads" when we flip our coins in these hopeless situations. But there is a way out, even if that way is one we couldn't possibly have imagined. It's there if we can keep our gaze fixed where it must be, rather than where our pain or our adrenaline or our friends and allies are telling us it should be. So let us flip our coins. But let us do so not hoping they will land on the right side, but begging God to catch them in midair, that we may search for them in the direction of heaven, and in so doing, get our eyes stuck on what's really important. Amen.