

## October 16, 2011 Matthew 22:15-22 "A Game of Tug-of-War"

**The Game:** A game of tug-of-war – Do you remember how it's played? 2 teams. . . (describe)

In our gospel reading from Matthew, there's a malicious game of tug-of-war going on between the Pharisees and the Herodians and Jesus is in the middle. They ask the question: "Is it right to pay taxes to the Emperor (Caesar) or not?" Let the game begin!

**The strategies:** Each team has a strategy for the game --

**Team A, the Pharisees,** want Jesus to answer, "Yes, taxes are fair!" Meaning that the emperor's divine authority is authentic. Then, they could yank the rope in their direction, "We caught you!" Saying this would be a sin against the belief in the one, true God and the Pharisees would then be able to criticize Jesus. (What they probably wanted to do in the first place.)

**Team B, the Herodians** (supporters of the political aspirations of Herod the Great) want Jesus to say, "No, taxes are not fair!" meaning the emperor's authority is not real. Then they tug the rope in their direction, "We caught you!" Saying this would be a crime of treason against the empire and then the Herodians would be able to criticize Jesus.

**Jesus also had a strategy.** He changed how the game of tug-of-war was played because he knew why the game was being played. He knew their intentions behind the questions being asked and he made the move to not be tugged either direction, but to cut the rope between the two teams! (Just picture what this would look like in your mind.) Jesus transforms the game by doing two things – asking questions and giving them a response that they can't refuse.

**First,** Jesus answers their question with questions of his own (part of the debate format), "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?" (Is he being the truth-teller by calling out that he knows their intentions aren't honorable?) "Show me the coin used for the tax" – show me the money! You will notice in the story that it isn't Jesus that pulls out the coin, but someone from the other "teams" that has one! "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They are now answering his questions. "The emperor's," they say correctly.

**Second,** after Jesus asks all of these questions, he gives them a response: "Give to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God's what is God's." He did not give the teams what they were looking for or what they expected – they were amazed at what they heard and they left him and went away. Jesus had cut the rope and changed the game. Who has a claim on you?

**What is our role in the game?** Have you ever been caught in the middle like Jesus was, the messy middle of not knowing what to do? We find ourselves in a tug-of-war between our faith,

our church, our government, and our culture. How do we handle it? Which tug do we heed and which team do we join?

**The claim of the emperor:** The past has shown us that national goals are surprisingly not always the goals of being a follower of Christ, even if our money says, “In God we trust.” Governments all over the world have used the very name of God to invoke injustice upon its people. Countries with political power, including our own, have at times used their power to dominate and corrupt others instead of helping others. We can’t be surprised by the fact that other places around the world may hate our own country because of decisions made.

How do we play this game and separate ourselves from this messiness? Do we stay away and not get involved? Do we turn our church into a compound, build a tall fence around it and pretend that it’s only us that matters? Separation of church and state does not separate church from society or from its messiness, but it doesn’t mean we have to play that game of tug-of-war at all. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “The church must be the critic and guide of the state, and never its tool.” We pay our taxes to our government, try to be an informed voter and become involved with the process to be a critic and a guide. It is not about choosing government or choosing God. It’s not about being a Christian and being in one particular political party over another. It’s about knowing who has a claim on us and whose image we bear.

**God’s claim:** How did Jesus know to change the rules of that game of tug-of-war and cut the rope? He knew that God’s compassion knows no bounds. He knew that if you truly looked at both teams in the game, God has a claim on all people. God’s glory is all around us because God is the Lord and there is no other. God’s boundless claim is that which bears the image of God – you. Each of you is created in the image of God and each of you is claimed by God – all of you through God’s love and forgiveness in sending his only Son to be in the messy middle. No matter what messiness we find ourselves in, be it a political tug-of-war, the occupy wall street movement, the frustration of how to best be a part of a community, or the messiness of a personal crisis, your hope is that God is the one who claims you and names you. Remember, give to God what is God’s – yourself.

*Note: I used this image of a tug-of-war before in a sermon, but can’t find in my notes where the idea is from regarding Jesus caught in the middle in this discussion from Matthew 22.*