



A New Song – Touchpoint for October 18, 2023

Matthew 22:15-22 (NIV) Paying the Imperial Tax to Caesar

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax^[a] to Caesar or not?”

¹⁸ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, ²⁰ and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

²¹ “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

²² When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

Psalms 96:1-3 (NIV)

- 1 Sing to the Lord a new song; *
sing to the Lord, all the whole earth.
- 2 Sing to the Lord and bless his Name; *
proclaim the good news of his salvation from day to day.
- 3 Declare his glory among the nations *
and his wonders among all peoples.

Grace and Peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move, and have our being.

In the book, *Let Your Voice Speak*, Parker Palmer shares a story from his Quaker clearness committee. Palmer was seeking vocational discernment. The committee asked Palmer questions to help him discern his own heart. On his mind was the offer to be president of a prestigious seminary. A committee member asked him, “What part of the job seems the most exciting to you?” After a long contemplative silence he said, “The first thing that came to mind is my picture in the school’s catalog.”

He decided not to take the job.

A reputation is built over time. A potential branding can be created in a brainstorming session. To rely on neither is to listen without interference to the deepest desires of our hearts which most often align with the will of God. Caesar had a coin made with his face on it. A self-declared lord. Parker felt the inner threat to his desire for prominence and popularity. Jesus lived according to his inner call. Unattached to a branding and of little reputation, his freedom was a threat to many and captivating to others. He didn’t lead with branding or reputation. He led with his deepest desire, which was to do the work of his Father.

What was the threat he presented to some?

I’ve felt that threat inside me all too often. The Caesar in me causes me great stress. For example, I was invited to be at a charity event last Saturday to raise money for cancer. It was called “Dribble for Cancer.” An unfortunate name for someone like me, who had bladder cancer. They honored cancer survivors, and many former NBA stars attended. I am still unsure which one I represented, a cancer survivor or a celebrity. At the

beginning I would have preferred just 'cancer survivor.' I've never been happier as a spiritual director. As the morning progressed, I switched to celebrity. Therein was the threat for me. A switch flipped in my ego driven motives. I saw former NBA star AC Green, Fat Lever, and Jeff Malone. Players that, back in the day, I shared the court with. Many of them obviously would not recognize me without my gorilla suit, but would know me if I said, "Hey, I'm Henry Rojas. I was the 'The Original Gorilla' for the Phoenix Suns. I love the reactions I get from the former players. Suddenly I found myself choosing celebrity.

I rarely encounter these situations anymore. I have had a wonderful life post-masking. I did not realize it, but it was triggering a lot of stress. Stress that I experienced in my former life as a character. Once I connected my new face to my old face for them, I could not resist rubbing shoulders. I gained more attention. Little did I know I was masking again. I got lost in signing a few autographs, taking selfies, and rubbing shoulders in the VIP shade. I went home with a smile on my face and an ulcer in my body. It was part of what triggered an ulcerative colitis flare-up.

Our bodies fight against being something we are not.

What does this have to do with the conversation between Jesus and Caesar's disciples? Jesus asks the disciples of Caesar, "Whose face is on the coin?" My Touchpoint is that I felt the threat. I had to ask myself, is my identity still tied to the character, even if situationally? Whose face does my business? What alter ego does my PR?

Perhaps we take a look at what things in life we attempt to own and put our image on. If you are a celebrity, is it the number of fans you amass or branding that matters? For the inventor, is it your product? For an executive, is it your empire?

The reality is we can't get away from creating a name for ourselves in business. We must find modern ways to match the fast-paced technology and social media industry.

I don't believe Jesus was saying he's against taxes. He was refusing to worship the love of money and power that builds oppressive empires and robs us of our inner freedom. As we, like Parker Palmer, discern our deepest desire, I think we can find the will of God within us. It resonates deeply. Our spirit bears witness with God's Spirit. They resonate together. Then we sing a new song. In music, the artist plays his song, and the strings vibrate in resonance. In our journeys we are singing a new song.

Psalms 96 declares,

Sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, praise his name;
proclaim his salvation day after day.

Proclaim His Salvation day after day.

It appears to me that Jesus is constantly trying to save people from themselves... from our egos searching for identity and value in the wrong places. Doesn't it seem like that to you? These guys come to him and say, "What is your opinion on Caesar's empire built on unfair taxes?" Jesus says in effect, "Here's what I think of your unfair tax. You rob people of their assets for a coin that is worth much less."

Maybe that's why Thomas Merton, when asked if he was saved answered, "Yes, every day." We are saved from our egos. How do we live this out? How do we move away from the ego's lure? The movie *Three Warriors* tell us that in our journey of identity we sing a new song, while never forgetting the song of our

ancestors. Chief Eagle Feather says to his grandson from the city, "You have learned the old ways, Michael, but they are not the only ways. There was a new song. The song of a proud warrior. This song will stay in your heart as you learn the new ways."

I think about Spirit in the Desert. I am in a place where I can work unmasked. I am part of an organization in which I don't need to put my face on. I've experienced the songs of others and they resonate. I come as I am, singing my new song. This is a retreat center whose mission is not unlike the call of Chief Eagle Feather.

"Deep down where the fire that warms our house, warms all who come here to pray, see visions, or for healing." It is the song that guides us.

The song I am singing today is still being written, but I'm really digging the beat!

Sing to the Lord a new song.

What song do you sing today?

Amen

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taize Choir, Remember Me)
Be still, know that I am God

Create in Me

(The Concordia Choir)

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from thy presence and take not the Holy Spirit from me.
Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation and uphold me with thy free spirit.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

In the Arms of God

(Tony Alonso, Marty Haugan, Michael Joncas)

Refrain: Come and rest in the arms of God. Leave your worry and fear.

Make your home in the heart of God. God will dry every tear.

For the burden you carry will fade within God's care. Come and rest in the arms of God.

- 1) Gentle is God's way and humble is God's heart. God's love will light the way that leads to peace. Surely you shall see God's goodness and God's grace. Rest now in God's embrace. *Refrain*
- 2) Do not be afraid. God heals the broken heart. Through grief and disbelief God still remains. God and God alone will be your soul's true rest. Fall in the arms of God. *Refrain*
- 3) You are not alone, for God is always near. Come place your doubt and fear within God's care. God will give you rest, and soothe your weary soul. Dwell in the heart of God. *Refrain*

The Meal

Lord's Prayer

(Robert Stone, The Cambridge Singers, John Rutter)

Benediction

A Celtic Blessing

(Margaret Rizza)

The guarding of the God of Life be on you,
The guarding of loving Christ be on you,
The guarding of the Holy Spirit be on you,
to aid and uphold you each day and night of your life.
The guarding of God, the guarding of Christ,
The guarding of the Spirit be upon you.