

“The Trap”
Matthew 22:15-22

“Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.”

With those words, the gospel writer Matthew alerts the reader to the fact that trouble for Jesus is growing. It is the last week of his life. It had begun so well with his celebrated entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Yet as soon as the shouts of “Hosanna!” faded Jesus had gone to the Temple Mount and driven out those who were selling and buying animals. He overturned the tables of those who were changing Roman coins into the common shekel, too, and left the city soon thereafter, returning the next day. The events from our reading occur on that Monday.

Prior to our text, Jesus had been confronted by the religious elite who challenged his authority, but were left silent by his reply. Jesus offered two parables, the second of which made his opponents furious. He continued with the allegory we heard last Sunday when he spoke of the Last Judgment and concluded with a declaration that “many are called, but few are chosen.” It is then that Matthew tells us “the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.”

Those laypeople prided themselves on following the law of God better than their peers and sent some of their followers to Jesus along with the Herodians—a priestly group of Jews whose power came from the fact that they colluded with the Romans. The team must have strategized before approaching Jesus and acted only when they were sure they had the perfect question to discredit him in front of his followers. “Teacher,” they begin “we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one... Tell us, then, what do you think. It is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

To understand the predicament of that question, it's helpful to know that twenty years earlier a Jewish man named Judas the Galilean had declared it treason against God to pay taxes to Rome and led a brief revolt. Emotions still ran high in Jesus' time much as in our own day questions about proper levels of taxation continue to stir voters. The tax he was asked about was a poll tax required of males aged 14 to 65 and females who were 20 to 65. It was one denarius, a day's pay for an unskilled laborer, which at Pennsylvania's minimum wage would be \$58.

The emotion behind that tax arose from more than the amount though, as a key Jewish article of faith held that it was wrong for a follower of God to pay tribute to any king other than God. The denarius bore the image of Emperor Tiberius, too, and had an inscription of “Tiberius Caesar, majestic son of the divine Augustus and high priest.” That visage and wording led Jewish pilgrims to change their coins at the Temple during Passover into a shekel as a Jew could not offer homage to God by using a coin that spoke of a man as divine. Thus to be asked “It is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not” was the perfect trap for if Jesus said “Don't pay it,” he would be guilty of treason and could be handed over to the authorities. If he said “Yes, pay the tax,” he would enrage his followers. The ones who posed that question must have had a smug look on their face as they awaited his answer, knowing they would win with either reply.

That situation reminds me of a tale in far more modern times of a man who received two neckties from his mother-in-law as Christmas gifts. His in-laws were staying with them for the holiday and so prior to the big meal he put on one of the ties for the occasion. As he walked into the room, his mother-in-law looked up at him and said “So, what's wrong with the other tie?”

Jesus' adversaries thought they had him in a no-win situation, too, but in response he said “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” One of them pulled out a denarius and Jesus asked whose image and title was on the coin and they replied “The emperor's.” It was then that he said “Give therefore [or ‘render’] to the emperor the

things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Matthew concludes the scene by noting "When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away."

Usually, persons will understand that scene to be one when Jesus affirms that we have duties both to God and to the state. That is certainly a faithful way to hear his response and was likely his main point. Yet on this morning, I'd like for us to ponder that response for something else he lifts up; namely the challenge believers have always faced in confronting everyday idols.

Our Reformed tradition speaks of the "human tendency toward idolatry," declaring that there is something in the human soul drawn to that which is not God. That no matter how much progress we make in devoting ourselves to God, we humans are forever tempted by the other.

For the Pharisees seeking to entrap Jesus on that day long ago there was the idol of prestige that they held because of extreme faithfulness to the law. For the Herodians, their idol was standing on the side of power. For both groups, if Jesus continued to attract new followers it could become a threat to their role. Thus they joined forces in their attempt to stop Jesus.

There are all kinds of idols today as well. There can be the idol of possessions, believing that we must accumulate more and more and then must spend more and more to protect those acquisitions. We saw both aspects of that struggle this past week with the unveiling of a facial recognition cell phone that costs \$1000 and the news of a massive data breach at Equifax. There can be the idol of youth sports where an ever-growing number of travel teams complicate home lives and fill schedules--including Sundays--in a way my generation of parents never had to consider. There can be the idol of success where in any setting we buy into the message that unless some statistical measure is always aiming upward that we are failing. Those pieces may not be your particular struggle, but all of us, at some point along the way are confronted by idols.

That does not negate the fact that many potential idols in our culture have good aspects. We need a certain level of possessions to make it. Our children need to exercise and learn of commitment and teamwork. We need to see ways that our efforts make a difference and signs of progress. What makes something an idol is when an otherwise good thing is taken too far.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells of a time years ago when he heard the true story of a bright young man who was a pre-med sophomore at Stanford University. To reward their son for doing so well his parents gave him a trip to the Far East for the summer break between his sophomore and junior years. While there, the young man met a guru who said "Don't you see you're poisoning your soul with this success-oriented way of life? Your idea of happiness is to stay up all night studying for an exam so you can get a better grade than your best friend. Your idea of a good marriage is not to find the woman who will make your whole, but to win the girl that everybody else wants. That's not how people are supposed to live. Give it up; come join us where we all share and love each other." The young man had completed four years at a tough high school in order to gain admission to Stanford and then two challenging years of pre-medicine coursework. Thus he was ripe for such an invitation. He called his parents from Tokyo and told them he wouldn't be coming home as he was dropping out of college to join the ashram.

Six months later his parents received the following letter: "Dear Mom and Dad: I know you weren't happy with the decision I made last summer, but I want to tell you how happy it has made me. For the first time in my life I am at peace. Here there is no competing, no hustling, no trying to get ahead of anyone else. Here we are all equal, and we all share. This way of life is in so much harmony with the inner essence of my soul that in only six months I've become the number two disciple in the entire ashram, and I think I can be number one by June!" (Kushner, Harold. *Who Needs God*. New York: Summit Books, 1989, pp. 96-7).

It is easy to fall into the trap of letting some aspect of life become an idol and hard to extricate ourselves. That reality was evident in those who came to Jesus long ago, too, as the irony of the trap they set for him is that it caught them. The fact they had one of those coins in their possession while standing in that sacred Temple revealed how they, too, were swept up into idols of their own making. They, too, needed the kind of life-changing transformation Jesus spoke of in response, but instead all we know is that they left amazed by his answer.

It takes awareness to break free of any idol. It takes courage to resist its siren call. It takes time to set things right and recalibrate, but such an effort is worth it.

On October 14, 2003, a Chicago Cubs fan named Steve Bartman reached up for a foul ball at Wrigley Field, setting in motion a series of events that changed his life. Many of you know that last year, the Cubs won the World Series for the first time in 108 years. They had not even been to that deciding round in 71 years, having come close a few times. Superstitious fans came to blame the drought on a Billy Goat of all things, but that's a story for another day.

On that night fourteen years ago, the Cubs were five outs away from going to the World Series when a foul ball was hit down the left side. Steve Bartman was seated along the railing and along with other fans reached for the ball. The leftfielder for the Cubs reached at the same time and it is still debated whether he could have caught the ball or not, but in either case Bartman deflected the ball and it dropped between the seats, making it a foul ball instead of an out. As the inning unfolded, the Cubs lead disappeared and they ultimately lost. Enraged fans turned on Bartman who had to be escorted out by security personnel. The Cubs lost the next day, too, and did not make it to the World Series until last fall and that man became the supreme scapegoat. The family had to change their phone number. He continued to live and work in the Chicago area, yet the venom of other fans continued on television and in print for years.

The reason I bring up those events is in July, the Chicago Cubs presented Steve Bartman with a World Series ring bearing his name. It was given by the team president and included statements from the Cubs and that fan. "We hope this provides closure on an unfortunate chapter of the story," the team said "that has perpetuated throughout our quest to win a long-awaited World Series. While no gesture can fully lift the public burden he has endured for more than a decade, we felt it was important Steve knows he has been and continues to be fully embraced by this organization." Bartman's response was both gracious and clear. "Although I do not consider myself worthy of such an honor," he said "I am deeply moved and sincerely grateful... I am relieved and hopeful that the saga of the 2003 foul ball incident surrounding my family and me is finally over." And then he added, "[I] hope we can all learn from my experience and view sports as entertainment and prevent harsh scapegoating." (Mather, Victor and Jay Schreiber "Cubs Bejewel a Fan's Infamous Hand," *The New York Times*. 8/1/17)

There are traps all around us, my friends, and our ongoing challenge is first, to resist them, but if caught in one, to begin getting things back in balance. All in such a way that we free ourselves from the idols of our days and then render unto God the fullness of our lives.