

October 22, Ordinary 29A (Matthew 22:15-22)

## **I take seriously the absence of a denarius in Jesus' own hand.**

by [Kerry Hasler-Brooks](#) in the [October 2023](#) issue

In my journey as a follower of Jesus, I have moved through and been shaped by very different Christian communities. These differences have been theological, geographical, socioeconomic, racial, and cultural. I was raised in a small Presbyterian church in New Hampshire; I was educated at a Baptist high school and a Brethren in Christ college, both predominantly White institutions; as a young adult, I matured in a Christian Reformed Church in North Philadelphia pastored by a Puerto Rican man, a Korean man, and a White woman; and I am now an active member in a 300-year-old Mennonite faith community.

My reading of scripture today is informed by each of these communities and their theological convictions, even those that I no longer hold or never held myself. I read scripture mindful of the very different ways people of faith engage, understand, interpret, and live out the sacred text. There is tension and disagreement in these differences, but there is also, for me, a keen sense of the need to read in community, to read with an openness to the fullness of possible meanings, a humility about our own understanding, a wisdom about the cultural biases or blind spots that we all have, and a commitment to the truth.

There are certain passages where this way of reading is particularly challenging. For me, the most challenging are often well-known passages with both a complicated history of interpretation and powerful implications for our lives. Matthew 22 is precisely this kind of passage. It contains some of Jesus' most well-known, quoted, and debated words: "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

I recall long-ago sermons on this passage, if not the precise language, then at least the way they felt to me. While ostensibly about taxes, something I understood little and cared about even less, I understood Jesus' words to offer a broad framework to

navigate the material and the eternal, the sociopolitical and the spiritual, the nation and the church. This passage is linked, for me, with the morning liturgy in my childhood school, an affiliate of the Baptist church in town. Each morning students and staff recited three allegiances: to the American flag, the Christian flag, and the Bible. These symbols and my allegiances to them were both distinct and compatible. Like Jesus' words, they were ordered into a tidy parallel structure of God on one side and nation or empire on the other, and I could navigate between them justly, living fully as loyal American and loyal Christian.

I now attend a flagless Mennonite church, and the simple parallel divide between God and empire has not held up in my intellectual logic, personal ethics, or lived practice of faith. As David Cramer writes, "We cannot simply line up two columns and make a checklist of things to give Caesar and things to give God. Our task is to discern together how to be faithful citizens in the culture and society in which we reside." The task of discernment begins, I think, with the way we read the passage itself. How we read here—both Jesus' words and his actions—determines how we live in response.

In the passage, Jesus stymies the Pharisees and the Herodians, cutting through the trap that has been set—"Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"—with a seemingly diplomatic decree. But before coming to this conclusion, an ostensibly moderate in-between of an answer, Jesus makes a simple but telling request: "Show me the coin used for paying the tax." Jesus himself does not seem to have a Roman coin on hand. As Stanley Hauerwas writes, "He does not carry the coin, quite possibly because the coin carries the image of Caesar." Hauerwas and Cramer suggest that Jesus lived outside the economics of the empire even as those around him accepted it. So he has to ask someone for a coin to use as a prop.

When I read Matthew 22, a chorus of radically different voices are in my head. I have come to understand Jesus as a loud protester against unjust systems of power, a divine voice for lived peace and material justice making, a radical lover of people. I take seriously the absence of a denarius in Jesus' own hand.

And yet, I also understand that many people read this passage very differently than I do. Some read it as a call into godly relationship with nation and empire, others as a call to speak and live against the corruptions of nation and empire. I am concerned with what is right and true about this passage, of course, but I am also concerned about the people who come to this passage. I think the important thing is to read this passage in community, open to the possibility of different meanings, humble

about our own understanding and misunderstanding, and committed to do justice and love mercy as we follow both the words and the life of Jesus.