**Knowing Who You Are**

**Isaiah 45:1-7**

**Matthew 22:15-22**

 **No one could deny it was a great answer to the question. Even the Pharisees knew they had been out done. They think for sure this time they have Jesus stumped so that he will be exposed for the radical, rabble rouser, trouble maker he is. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” This is like asking Jesus where do you stand on Obama Care, abortion, gun rights, gay marriage, that image of you in the stained glass window? Most every-day people have strong feelings about the oppressive Roman tax, which they hate. At the same time, publicly speaking out against the tax will put Jesus in jeopardy with the Roman authorities. After getting them to show him a coin and acknowledge the Emperor’s head is on the coin, Jesus responds, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”**

 **We immediately recognize in Jesus one who is willing and able to face challenges, difficulty, even hostility, with confidence, calm and self assurance. Jesus knows who he is and what he is about. With little hope or expectation that we have within us the same ability or capacity we nonetheless admire what we see in Jesus.**

 **It is, of course, possible that like Govern Dayton and Republican candidate Jeff Johnson getting ready for a debate, Jesus has been practicing with the disciples for the questions he expects will be thrown his way. These challenging questions are, after all, nothing new. Religious authorities are forever trying to trip him up in a way that will discredit Jesus in front of the people. We can imagine Jesus gathered with the disciples who are asking Jesus one question after the other, getting him ready for the impending debate. Maybe Jesus was completely prepared for their question and had rehearsed in advance the whole let me see a coin answer. That answer would play extremely well on the 24 hour news cycle.**

 **“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”**

 **Yet, when we look at the life of Jesus what we see is someone who again and again handles the challenges, difficulties, and struggles he faces with the same confidence, resolve and inner assurance that he exhibits in our Gospel story today. There is no need to imagine that his answer is rehearsed. We wonder, how does Jesus do it? How does one face the challenges we encounter in life without getting immediately tripped up, getting snared or snagged into responses or ways of being that only make matters worse? How does one handle challenges like this without simply throwing in the towel, giving up, or responding in ways that are a far cry from the type of people we hope to be?**

 **One option, of course, is avoidance. If at all possible stay away from, deny or ignore the situation that we believe will cause us problems. Religious authorities are far from the only ones who ask difficult questions. Every parent with a young child can tell you that children are capable of asking questions that would be the equal of anything Jesus faces from the Pharisees. “If God take the form of a baby, what would have happened to God if his human father Joseph accidently dropped him on his head?” The avoiding parent responds, “go ask your mother” or “go ask your father” or worse yet, “go ask Pastor Tim”.**

 **We avoid difficult conversations all the time because we lack confidence, self-assurance that we will be able to handle them without making matters worse. We recognize something doesn’t feel right in our bodies, but rather than address it, see a Doctor, we avoid it, thinking maybe the problem will just go away. We have concerns in a relationship, issues we know that have been festering, but rather than talk about them, bring them out in the open; we avoid the whole thing as if everything is fine. In our family, Michele is always the first one to say, “what’s that funny sound the car is making?” For my part, I tune those things out. “What sound?” At the moment it always seems so much easier, if you avoid the problem, avoid the challenge, avoid the difficulty.**

 **I can only assume that one of the reasons so many preachers avoid talking about the political and social implications of the Bible is the desire to avoid the challenges those social implications present. The longer I have preached, the more I study and read the Bible, the more I realize that one really has to look the other way if one wants to stay away from the political dimensions of Scripture. You have to make a serious effort at avoidance. Moses, who is the central figure in the Old Testament, goes face to face with the powerful Pharaoh of Egypt, demanding freedom and liberation for the Hebrew slaves. Oppressed people to this day recognize the political implications of Moses. Jesus, as we know, regularly finds himself in conflict with religious and political authorities. Today’s Gospel is just one example among many. “Whose head is on the coin and whose title?” How does one ignore the political implications of a question like that?**

 **From Genesis, which speaks about our relationship with creation to Revelation, which offers a vision of a city where people of all nations dwell, the real life political implications of Scripture are almost impossible to miss. And yet, preachers commonly look the other way, avoid if at all possible, those things that make us uncomfortable and are challenging.**

**While avoidance of problems may bring immediate relief from an uncomfortable situation it is rarely a long term solution. It may feel like a safer approach in the short run, but it can come with a considerable cost. The cost can include a sudden crisis of heath, relationships, economies built on inequality that have been too long avoided, unjust incarceration that ignores the systemic roots of racism. It can include the diminishment of our soul and sense of self when we fail to speak up or turn away from situations that need our attention or our voice.**

 **Is it possible that we too can find the inner strength, the self-assurance, the capacity that enables us to face the challenges and difficulties, which come our way? We see Jesus as highly exceptional and therefore conclude we could never expect to respond as Jesus responds, with confidence, self-assurance and calm. We will never come up with an answer like Jesus does with the Pharisee. But, when we look at Jesus’ life what we find is that Jesus strength, self-confidence, willingness to face challenges rather than avoid them, comes from the very basic and fundamental awareness that God is in him and he is in God. Jesus knows who he is.**

 **In our Children’s Story we read this morning called “God Created” the story begins with the simple proposition that God created everything and then ends with the affirmation “God created you.” We are mistaken if we conclude this story is nothing more than a sweet affirmation of God’s care for us and the world. On the contrary, when taken to heart and lived out, as Jesus does, an awareness that God’s creative love is a part of all of life, can become the foundation for a child standing up to a bully with confidence, offering comfort to a friend who is sad, knowing how to resist pressure from peers when it would be easier just to go along. This is the type of self-assurance that gives us Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Sojourner Truth, Oscar Romero and the many unsung heroes who every day live their lives with courage and confidence. What is our identity? Do we know who we are?**

 **Jesus knows who he is and so when he is asked, “whose coin is this?” he immediately knows what to say, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” According to Jesus, everything and everyone comes from God, including those who challenge him with difficult questions, including us. Do we know who we are? Jesus does.**

**Isaiah 45:1-7**
*The prophets seldom lack for confidence. When they speak, they speak with the assurance that God is at work in our world and no matter how bleak the situation, they can place their trust in the justice of God. In today’s lesson the Prophet insists God will use a foreign leader by the name of Cyrus to bring about the justice of God and release the people from Exile in Babylon.*

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes,
to open doors before him — and the gates shall not be closed: I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.

**Matthew 22:15-22**

***In our Gospel lesson religious leaders once again try to place Jesus in an impossible situation from which they believe he will be unable to escape. The people of Israel are occupied by Rome and are forced to pay taxes that continue benefiting the rich and powerful. This is a source of considerable tension for the people. Many religious authorities, however, have made their peace with Rome and even benefit from the taxes. By asking Jesus about the tax they believe they can force Jesus to either endorse Rome’s oppressive rule and be alienated from the people or present himself as a rebel opposed to Rome. With confidence and self-assurance, Jesus once again turns the tables on his questioners.***

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.