

Recently a friend pointed me to Merriam-Webster’s “Time Traveler” website, which lists for each year the words or terminology that first became popular enough to appear in print. I looked up my birth year and was surprised to find that I’m the same age as these terms: *attention-deficit-disorder*; *bed-and-breakfast*; *frequent-flyer*; *gene-splicing*; *information technology*; *off-grid*; *sticky note*; and *trans fat*. There are others, but one more that grabbed my attention is *whataboutism*: the, I’m not even sure you can call it a debate tactic, but the method of trying to win an argument not with facts or logic but by bringing up something else that seems similar or worse. We see this all the time these days: a news anchor asks a pundit about a corrupt politician in their party, and instead of answering the question or denouncing the corruption, they say, *But what about...* this person from the other political party. So the aim is not to address the issue at hand but to be able to say “gotcha!” to the other side. I’m impressed that it took until the year I was born for this to formally enter our vocabulary since the gospels show us people addressing conflict this way at least as far back as Jesus’ day.

Matthew tells us explicitly that the Pharisees were plotting to entrap Jesus. They do this, not by doing their own dirty work, but by sending their disciples along with the Herodians. We don’t know much about the Herodians because they don’t appear in contemporary literature outside of the Bible, but we may assume from their name that they are supporters of Herod and his regime. That means that they would not usually agree socially and politically with the Pharisees. But the enemy of my enemy is my friend, so these two groups who normally would not associate with one another join forces against Jesus. They begin with flattery: *We know you are a sincere teacher of God’s truth...* And then they try to get Jesus to take a stance on paying taxes to the emperor.

Now, as much as we may complain about taxes, it is worth noting that Roman taxation in ancient occupied territories is not the same as our tax system now. We’re not talking about funding schools or roads or other public services through a percentage of income. Roman taxes in Jesus’ day were used as a tool of oppression, causing desperate poverty without providing for the common good. The famous claim of Pax Romana, the Peace of Rome, was not so much a promise of peace as a military installation: Rome conquered a nation and then taxed its inhabitants to pay for the army that occupied them—keeping order, but by threat of violence. And the practice of collecting taxes was corrupt, as we see from the gospels grouping tax collectors with other unscrupulous sinners. So we can argue about where we want our tax dollars to go or whether corporations or the ultra-wealthy should pay more or less income tax than a nurse or a mechanic, but that’s not the issue here. The Pharisees and Herodians are trying to get Jesus either to sanction the exploitation of his own people by Rome or commit sedition by saying the people shouldn’t pay taxes—a “gotcha” either way.

Jesus flat-out asks, *Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?* Then he asks them for a coin. They could have shown him a shekel, which is the coin that was allowed in the temple, where this conversation is taking place; this is why there were moneychangers at the temple, to change Roman coins into shekels; some of those moneychangers were corrupt, hence Jesus overturning tables. But instead of a shekel, they give him a denarius—the Roman coin that is not to be used by observant Jews, least of all in the sacred space of the temple, and this is why: Jesus asks them whose head and whose title is on the coin, and they say “the emperor’s”...Now, the reason Roman coins were exchanged for shekels was because the Roman denarius had a picture of the emperor and an inscription claiming the emperor’s divinity...so by carrying that coin, in the temple of all places, they are breaking the commandment to have no other gods and to make no graven images. In their attempt to trick Jesus into breaking the law, they are, themselves, breaking the laws of God which they were claiming to uphold so much more rigorously and righteously than everyone else.

We could talk about how Jesus’ response, “Give to the emperor what is the emperor’s and to God what is God’s” is really *not* about the separation of church and state as we talk about today in this country, which again, like the taxes, is not at all the same as Jesus’ context. And we could talk about how Jesus is essentially insulting the emperor—as in, *go ahead and give this nearly worthless coin to the emperor, since his image is on it; but remember that God’s image is on everyone and all of creation belongs to God.* That is certainly part of what this passage is telling us. But how this passage speaks to me most in this polarized world in which we’re living is as a cautionary tale against the kind of arrogance that would lead us to try to entrap others in a “gotcha” moment of our own, especially in matters of the spirit. The Word of God was given to us to awaken and sustain our faith, not to be used as a weapon against those with whom we disagree. And believe me, as a minister who happens to be female and happens to belong to a denomination that seeks to include those who have historically been excluded, I often encounter folks who are armed with the verses to prove to me how wrong I am; and I am mightily tempted to flippantly answer them with a, “Yeah? Well? What about...” instead of engaging in a conversation that could lead to, if not agreement, at least respect and mutual understanding. But that instruction to give to God the things that belong to God calls us to always remember that our adversaries, and even those whom we would outright call enemies, also bear the image of God. Any time we draw a line between ourselves and others, we’re going to find Jesus on the other side of that line. So, what might our world look like if we spent less time seeing God as our winning card in arguments against others and more time seeing in others the image of God? I believe we are called to find out.