

Why does Jesus have to make things so complicated? The Pharisees make it so simple: choose God, or choose Caesar. Imagine standing before your life – looking at all you have, all you are – and being asked to divide your life into a God stack and a Caesar stack. That's easy enough, isn't it? We first might well ask, "Well what do we mean by 'Caesar's' and 'God's'." Are we not talking perhaps about two very different kingdoms?" One kingdom is that of our contemporary empires, our political and governing and legal and cultural ways of being that require much of us. This kingdom asks our allegiance in terms of taxes, yes, but also in terms of obedience to laws, obedience to gainful employment, obedience even to cultural norms and behaviors. Over and against this is the Kingdom of God. Here we have simply obedience to the will of God. What comes of that allegiance is loving relationship with God and God's creation. And the things of this kingdom help to make that happen. And so to divide our lives between these two kingdoms is to ask, "What belongs to the realm of Caesar, and what belongs to the realm of God?"

And so let's say you begin to sort. Here is your Prayer Book. Well, that's a no-brainer; that goes into the God pile. Here is your Home Depot charge card; well, that's Caesar's...clearly. Here is your Clorox Cleaner...Caesar's. Here is your Bible, and some prayer beads...God's. Here is your job... Caesar's (I mean it's a "secular" job, right?). Here are your 25 pairs of shoes... OK, that's Caesar's too. Your car and your house...well, Caesar's as well. Your family... well, you had better put them in the God pile... even though...well, never mind. Here's your collection of cook books and recipes... some are your Grandmother's... well, that's all pretty earthly...Caesar's pile. Your TV and DVD collection... Caesar's...

And so it goes. And before long you have a monstrous pile of Caesar, and tiny pile of God. And if that makes you feel kind of bad, well, then you just need to go out and get some icons to decorate your home, a new cross for your neck, get rid of some of the Caesar stuff, until the piles are more or less equal. It's that easy, isn't it? [I see some heads shaking]. Well, that is the hope of the trap that the Pharisees lay for Jesus. They say to Jesus, "Go ahead and sort. Either way you choose you die. Chose God, the Romans will kill you. Chose Rome, and the Jewish people will kill you."

But Jesus brings up that pesky word, "image." "Whose image is on the denarius?" Jesus asks. And the Pharisees (and we) are immediately transported to the creation narrative of Genesis, where we are told that we are created in the image of God, and that all of creation is "good, very good." "That which is in Caesar's image belongs to Caesar. That which is in God's image belongs to God," Jesus just has to say. Suddenly things are now much more complicated, so much so that the Pharisees have to retreat and reload. Instead of two well-delineated piles – Caesar here, God here – we have a much blurrier situation. The word "image" serves as a bridge between the two. Perhaps we are really talking about two sides of the same coin.

When Jesus teaches his followers about the Kingdom of God, have you noticed that he doesn't describe a counter-kingdom, a "second pile?" Whether it is the parable of the wedding banquet, or the parable of the talents, or the parable of the Prodigal Son, or the mustard seed the movement is one of transforming one's way of being. It is not that there is an alternative kingdom; it is simply that the transformation into the Kingdom of God is not complete. All of us are made in God's image, and the things and relationships of our lives bear that mark as well. Or at least they are intended to be transformed into objects and relationships that bear the image of God. That which is Caesar's is ultimately God's, but it may or may not yet be transformed.

This makes life a lot more complicated, or at least so it seems. At times we all might wish for things to be more clear cut, for our choices to be more clearly for God. I am reminded of a

Sunday school class I was attending about 10-12 years ago, well before seminary. We were talking about the martyrdom of Stephen – who was stoned to death in the Book of Acts – and the question was about similar contemporary figures. I mentioned the Jewish dissident Natan Sharansky, who was imprisoned for his protests against the Soviet regime in the 1970's and 80's. In prison one of the few possessions he had was a book of psalms, a book that he cherished because the psalms were his link to God. Well, Sharansky's captors took away this book due of his lack of cooperation. Immediately Sharansky went on a hunger strike, refusing to eat or drink until his book of psalms was returned. The strike went for over a hundred days. The West nations knew about the imprisonment of Sharansky – this was in the midst of the Cold War, and he was internationally known – and so the Soviets could not afford to let him die. They force-fed him through a tube to keep him alive. The Soviets would not yield. Sharansky would not yield. He would not give to Caesar the things that are of God. Now the lines are clear cut: God vs. empire and atheistic regime. In the Sunday School I marveled at Sharansky's willingness to die, and I wondered aloud whether I could do what he had done. Did I believe enough to die for the sake of God? I doubted whether I had the courage. The priest who was leading the class, Elizabeth Rector, looked at me and said something I will never forget. She said [I'm paraphrasing], "You know. What you do every day is every bit as courageous as a Soviet dissident. He had a focus, an object upon which he could concentrate all of his faith: a book of psalms. It was very clear cut: I get my psalms – this symbol of God and faith – or I die. You, on the other hand must live every day of your life without such a focus. What you and all of us do is infinitely harder because we must continually discern for ourselves what is that object of faith, the focus, without which we would cease to live." That stopped me in my tracks, and gave me quite a bit to think about. I had to retreat and reload.

Whereas Sharansky had a clear cut choice – a God stack and a Caesar stack – for the rest of us we have one pile that is intended to be transformed from one way of being into another, a coin intended to be flipped. If we were to return to the two piles I originally outlined we can see this very clearly. Take the Prayer Book... well, that is only of God as long as I use it to further God's love. Take the 25 pairs of shoes... do they really belong in Caesar's pile if you wear them to walk to end hunger or find a cure for ALS? And doesn't the Clorox bear the image of God as you use it as a Sacred Sweeper? The cook books have wonderful recipes for bread. What if you baked home-made bread for the food pantry, or for someone who is having a hard time. The family... well, we might like them to be in the God pile... but what if there is such hardness of heart there that there is nothing reflecting the love of God? How does one begin to transform these relationships? Does your house really reflect empire when you strive to make it a shelter that promotes loving respect for its inhabitants and for the world beyond its walls?

Jesus is leading us to understand that the hard work of our lives is the work of transformation, not only of ourselves but of the relationships and objects of our lives as well. Next Sunday we will be celebrating Oblation Sunday as a part of our stewardship season. And Oblation Sunday is simply a way of acknowledging that this transformation is already happening in our lives, and we can celebrate the ways this is so in our shared home we call St. Gabriel's. Before next Sunday each and every one of us is invited to consider the ways that we give of ourselves here. Oblation means, "self-giving." It may be in singing. It may be in mowing. It may be as a vestry member. It may be in sewing quilts, or teaching young people. It may be simply in coming here to pray and worship (which is the first and greatest gift – our communal love of God). In whatever ways that you give – and it may be numerous – I would like you to think of a symbol of that gift. If it is sewing, then some fabric or thread. If it is arranging flowers then

oasis. If it is worshipping then the Prayer Book that you typically use. Be creative! Then next Sunday we will have a combined Eucharist – 8:00 and 10:30 together, and during the Presentation Hymn, you will be invited to come forward and place this symbol of your oblation on or in front of the altar. During the praying of the Eucharistic Prayer these symbols will be blessed as oblations of ourselves. When the communion is over I will then ask you to take these symbols up and carry them back into your lives as outward and visible signs of the grace of God's love working in you.

Ours is the task of transformation, not only of ourselves but of the world around us. We do so bit by bit, piece by piece, relationship by relationship, flipping coins over. That which is Caesar's is ultimately meant to be of God. Denari are meant to transform lives. Swords are meant to plow fields. We are meant to reflect God's image in every aspect of our lives. When we speak of stewardship the three T's of time, talent, and treasure point to this fourth and greatest T: transformation. Maybe it is not so complicated after all. It is hard. But as Sharansky notes in his book, "Can there be any other way?"