



**October 19, 2008**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Matthew 22:15-22

## “Outside the Lines”

When I was five years old my mother enrolled me in dance classes because my teacher had suggested it might help me overcome my shyness. I remember that my mother even invited another child from the class to come play at our house while our mothers chatted and had coffee.

The other little girl was older—six years old. We played dolls, we played house, then we sat down to color. I colored my picture; she colored hers. When we had finished she bent to look at my page. “Oh no honey!” she exclaimed. “That’s not how you color, sweetheart!”

The “honey” and “sweetheart” grated on my nerves. “Here, honey, let me show you mine,” she said. She brought her picture over to where I was sitting. “See,” she said, showing me how she had outlined every figure carefully with her crayon, neatly coloring all the spaces inside the lines. “You aren’t supposed to color outside the lines.” Her forehead crinkled with concern as she pointed to all my boisterous squiggles that leapt fearlessly across the page, with a reckless lack of respect for the lines printed there. “Let’s start over,” she proposed. At this point I suggested we go outside to play, thereby avoiding further instructions from this little girl who called me “honey”.

Ok, what’s this story from my childhood have to do with our worship today? I believe this event was one of my first experiences of meeting Pharisees and Herodians, as Jesus did in our Gospel for today. Let me explain.

The interrogators here are Pharisees. The Pharisees were the major party within Judaism to survive the wars with Rome. In Jesus’ time the Pharisees were the

principal representatives of Judaism. They were concerned with interpretation of the Torah, the books of God's Law. They operated out of synagogues, the local community's religious center, where prayers were said and God was worshipped through study. The Pharisees believed that if all Israel would live God's law perfectly for twenty-four hours, the Messiah would come. To try to accomplish this, they promoted rules MORE STRICT than those in Scripture—in hopes their rules might prevent people from breaking God's laws even accidentally.

These obedient, observant Jews hated the constraints they suffered under Roman rule. They found it humiliating and infuriating to pay for the continued support of the Roman state. In this incident they are possibly asking Jesus about the poll tax that was levied in 6 A.D. which sparked many Roman-Jewish clashes.

The Pharisees were a “color inside the lines” bunch. They established lines and boundaries regarding faithful living of God's law. They established lines and boundaries regarding how to interact with those occupying their land and commanding their people. The Pharisees had a “party line”, and they would have violently objected to any religious figure who suggested they pay taxes to their Roman rulers.

The Pharisees carefully sent a specific delegation to questions Jesus. In addition to their own followers, they sent a group of Herodians. This union of forces is strange. It only occurs here and in one other event described in the third chapter of Mark—in an account of an attempt to destroy Jesus.

The Herodians were in league with the civil authorities. Rome had endorsed the continued rule of those who descended from Herod. Herodians drew their power from Rome's power. If Jesus failed to support his people paying taxes to Rome, the Herodians would have moved against him. They were a “color inside the lines” group also--- with their own party line. The Pharisees had been quite astute. If Jesus colored inside THEIR lines, he would be madly scribbling outside the Herodians' lines, and vice versa. They intended to put Jesus between the proverbial rock and hard place.

This story is about more than Jesus' opinion on paying taxes. Here Jesus is dealing with human tendencies to set up party lines and enforce adherence to them. He is teaching about ultimate loyalty to God above any party line.

Jesus' first words to his questioners reveal his understanding of their true intent. They don't really want to hear his views on taxes. They want to trap him in his words. Jesus names them for what they are in this situation: hypocrites. They pretend to care about his views, but they only care about the preservation of their

own ways of thinking and operating. Their main goal here is to destroy Jesus' credibility with the people who are drawn to him.

In raising up the denarius, the Roman coin, Jesus makes his point. In life we will have to decide whether or not to obey civil laws, or engage in civil disobedience. To pay taxes, or refuse to pay them.

Jesus teaches here that the underlying principle directing what we decide will always be our relationship to God. We are to give what is God's to God.

What is God's my friends? Everything, right? Including our very selves. We're not to hang onto anything. It's all God's. All God's. We are to do all we can to make EVERYTHING ON THIS EARTH AND IN OUR BEINGS available to do the work of God----- work that loves without end, which cares for justice and mercy for all people and all creation. This is not a "color inside the lines" kind of principle. It's a wild notion that sweeps through all our party lines like a pure yet powerful wind.

Friends, life is difficult. Life is confusing. As we sit in the midst of an array of parts on Christmas Eve, trying to put together the tricycle we are giving to little Timmy or Janie, we scrounge for printed directions. What panic enters our hearts if they are missing! We long for directions, rules, order in the midst of chaos that will help us get it right. We want lines to color in--- what on earth will we do with a blank page??

When it comes to our faith, we do the same kind of thing. We want God to fit into OUR scheme of things. We believe God is on the side our OUR party line. It's not just political groups or religious groups that have party lines. The local PTA does, as do the AMA, Weight Watchers, La Leche League and the USA Rock Paper Scissors League. We even have unofficial party lines in our own families: about having an artificial vs. a fresh Christmas tree, about eating tomatoes with sugar or with salt.

Jesus never fit into ANY group's party line. Some of his disciples were Jewish zealots, fiercely committed to ousting the Romans, and other followers were Roman collaborators. Jesus does not call anyone to a particular party—Jesus calls us to a relationship with God.

There's a wonderful story that illustrates how we'd like to relate to God. A four year old boy was conversing with his mom:

He asked, "Is God everywhere?"

“Yes, dear,” his mother replied.

“Is he in this room?”

“Yes, he is.”

“Is he in my mug?”

At this point the mother was growing a bit uneasy, but she repeated the answer,

“Well, um... yes.”

The child clapped his hand over the top of his mug and exclaimed jubilantly, “I got ‘im!!”

God doesn't work like that- we never control God!

God will never line up perfectly with our party lines, whether we are Democrats or Republicans, whether we are opposed to abortion being legal except in rare instances or in favor of general legalized abortion, whether we are opposed to all military conflicts, or committed to the need for military action when necessary to prevent loss of innocent life. God has the disconcerting habit of turning up in those who stand OUTSIDE our lines and categories of truth. God has the disconcerting habit of appearing in the enemy—the one who opposes our party lines and beliefs. God has the troubling habit of commanding us to LOVE our ENEMIES----- AND to give all that is God's (EVERYTHING! IN US AND AROUND US) back to God.

How can we ever really do this? There is a saying of Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher/theologian: “God is better addressed than expressed.” The Walk to Emmaus retreat ministry puts it this way: “Christianity isn't a religion, it's a relationship.” We are called to a relationship with God, made known to us through Jesus Christ, living in our midst and in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. In all our “coloring” both inside and outside of lines, we must turn again and again to God. May God's presence and power teach us and enable us to “Give to God the things that are God's”, including our decisions and behavior. Christ calls us to loyalty to God ABOVE any and every party line, ABOVE ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING. Trust God- with him we can do this—and the coloring we do together will be outside the lines, but more beautiful than we can imagine. AMEN!