

Howdy!

Shepherd's Grace Church

October 19, 2014

Then the Pharisees went away and began to plot to entrap him for the things he was saying. So they sent their disciples along with the Herodians who went to Jesus saying, "Teacher, we know you are sincere and that you teach the ways of God according to the truth for you show deference to no one because you regard no people with partiality." "Tell us then, what do you think? Is it lawful for us 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 that is used to pay the tax." They brought him a denarius and he asked them, "Whose face is on the coin and whose title?" The Emperor, they answered. Jesus said, "Then give to the Emperor that which belongs to the Emperor and give to God that which belongs to God!" When they heard his answer, they were amazed and they left him and went away. (Matt. 22: 15-22) (Also read Is. 45: 1-7)

(This morning, we are outdoors. This is cowboy church Sunday at Shepherd's Grace! We have the wind blowing in our hair, the sun shining on our faces and the different smells, sights and sounds outside our sanctuary that are often blocked by the walls that set the Sanctuary apart from the world. These noises affect the way we worship. Some distract. Others call attention to God's creative and majestic presence. Our hope is that on this day we can overcome distractions and focus on worship as our fathers and mothers did. On this day, we hope to put aside technology and even some of our comfort as we embrace the elements of nature and even of creation. God has a word for us today and it is a word embraced in the music of Donnie Huffman's band; a word encountered in the strangeness of children's time; a word recognized in the offering of our gifts; a word proclaimed not only in this sermon but in all the elements that make it up! Today, the message is more than an encounter with God's word given in the Bible but also an encounter with the world in which we are called to live and move and have our being! Today, God takes us back to our yesterdays so God can move us forward to our tomorrows! In this message, there is a word for you. In this message there is a word for me. In this message, there is a word for the world that is so desperately seeking something. This morning, God invites you and me to do one thing. Listen! Listen to what God has to say to you! Embrace the difference of your surroundings and recognize in the difference a different way to comprehend God's incredible grace! Listen! Listen and be amazed!)

Howdy! Howdy, that is a word. It is not a word that is heard often anymore. Time was, "Howdy" was a word used to greet just about everyone, everywhere. It is not a real word of course. Howdy, like so many other words is a contraction. It is an attempt to shorten a sentence and get to the heart of a matter. In this case, "Howdy" is short for *How are you doing*. It is a contraction developed in the Midwest as an attempt to informalize speech and genuinely inquire about the health and happiness of the person to whom it was addressed. "Howdy" was a greeting intended to allow the person to whom it was addressed to respond by expressing the person's reason for visiting or approaching. When someone said, "Howdy" they really wanted to know, *How are you doing?*

Over time, “Howdy became a formality. It was shortened to “Hi” and “Hey” or any one of several other greetings intended not as an invitation to conversation but more as an aversion. Today, people do not say “Howdy” much but if they do, it is rarely an invitation to talk. Instead, it is as a courtesy, a polite but dismissive way of recognizing the person and getting rid of them at the same time. “Howdy, Hi, Hello, What’s up?,” are all perfunctory phrases issued in passing with the hope that they will not be followed up. In these phrases, people are acknowledged but they are not recognized!

Today, God wants to say “Howdy!” Instead of saying it in a 21st century way, however, God wants to say it in a 6th or 7th century B.C. way. Today, God wants to say, I am here to get your attention! Look around at the evidence of my presence. Look at the trees behind you! Look at the grass that blows in the wind. Look at the sunshine! Look at the smiles on children’s faces and realize that in all things I am God! I have placed a mark on creation that cannot be denied! You can deny me, you can deny my existence but you cannot deny what you see. In what you see, my hand is evident and just because you deny it doesn’t mean it is not real. Just because you deny me doesn’t mean these things will go away.

This is the word God had for Cyrus in the book of Isaiah! “Howdy” God said! I am God, and you do not know me but there is no other beside me! Howdy! Imagine God making Godself known to you for the very first time by coming up and saying, “Howdy!” Cyrus does not know God and now, the creator of the universe presents Himself before Cyrus and is genuinely interested in Cyrus’ success! How would you respond if you were Cyrus? How would you acknowledge God?

For his entire life, Cyrus has been taught that there is a god for every season and purpose. He prays not to one God but to many and has been immensely successful in his efforts! He has gone before gods at the various temples, made the offerings, made the sacrifices and has been rewarded for his faithfulness! Now, YHWH, the one true God, the God who created the heavens and the earth shows up and says, “Howdy!”

People who are successful have a difficult time hearing that their success is not really their success. Successful people tend to have an ego. They want to believe that the trappings of success are earned by them and not the result of other forces or plans. I suggest that Cyrus is not exception. When God says, “Howdy” to Cyrus, Cyrus wants to answer, “I’m doing fine...I’m doing just fine!” I imagine Cyrus cannot believe he is not headed for an imminent success in another military campaign.

In our lives we sometimes feel we are on top of the world as well do we not? Things are going well and we have friends and family to surround us. We are perhaps successful in our work or in the way we invest our money! School is going particularly well and we are getting great grades! The college we want has just sent a letter accepting us for enrollment! In those moments when we feel particularly successful, how do we acknowledge God?

Cyrus acknowledged God with surprise didn’t he? God said, “Howdy” and Cyrus said, “I do not know you!” God said, “You are right, you do not know me!” Then God proceeded to tell Cyrus who God was. I am the master of the universe! Everything you have ever conquered is because of me! Everything you have ever accomplished is because of me and even though you do not know me, I know you and even though you think you have accomplished all t his on your own, it has all been according to my will. It has

all been according to my plan! “Howdy” Cyrus, it is nice to meet you. I have chosen you even though you do not know me because all you are about to accomplish is going to be accomplished in exactly the right way, in exactly the right time so that not only you, but all whom I have chosen may come to believe that **I AM LORD!** There is none other, none beside me! I am God!

As we hear these words, we should remember that Cyrus was going to defeat Babylon. He was going to eventually send the exiled Hebrews home. He did not know who the Hebrews were. He had no way of knowing they were God’s chosen people. He only knew that victory was given to him and in that victory he was made immortal! He was remembered forever. It never dawned on him that he was but a pawn in God’s plan for the redemption of all of God’s creation. Perhaps he gave thanks to other gods, paid homage to them and recognized forces of strength that were gathered to give him victory but the one true God was the one who accomplished not Cyrus’ purposes but his own!

The truth is, God uses all of God’s creation to accomplish God’s purposes all the time. In Romans 8, Paul tells us that God will use all that is available to accomplish God’s will and plan. God uses Cyrus for that purpose today and God uses each of us. We are not only tools for God but we are stewards for God of all creation and even if we fail to acknowledge God, God continues to use us. Even if we do not give God the praise, the honor, the glory, God still carries out God’s plan for redemption using all God has created! **I AM GOD! THERE IS NONE BESIDE ME!** This is God’s own proclamation and it is exactly where God meets us this morning in the words of the evangelist, Matthew!

Today, the Pharisees move away from Jesus for awhile. They move away because he has been talking to them in parables which have reminded them that the “Kingdom of Heaven” is very different from the “empire of the world.” They have become convicted of misunderstanding God’s plan and purpose for God’s people! They have heard that God’s kingdom is not built on the magnificence of mansions and temples. God’s kingdom is not dependent on the wealth of the world but upon the grace of God! The stone the builders rejected, Matthew tells us from Psalm 118 shall become the corner stone! That stone which appears inferior, that stone which appears weak, that stone which appears insignificant or even invisible is the stone that God uses. That stone is nothing other than God’s grace which looks past human failure to the willingness of Jesus to give even his life so that we might have life!

The Pharisees move away because they do not want to change the way they move in the world. They move away because they believe that God’s justice is the same as human justice. They move away because they cannot accept that God can forgive or that God can use those who are weak or poor or ignorant! They move away because they have gotten comfortable in their lifestyle and the words of Jesus have convicted them. They move away to plot! They move away to plan! They move away to regroup! They move away to try to trap Jesus! The people regard him as a prophet. They move away because they must show him as a false prophet. They move away to devise a scheme that will show him for what he is! They must convict him as a fraud!

At Bible Study this past Wednesday, we started a conversation about the first and second letters of Peter. Part of the beginning of every study I lead is an effort to understand the context of the book we are studying. It is important, I believe, to know about the people and places to whom the book was

written in the first place so we can accurately discover meanings for them that can be claimed for us. One of the strategies for discovering context is knowing the author. In this case, the author is claimed to be Peter. During our conversation, I raised questions about whether Peter could really be the author of the book. If you want to know some of those questions, you should come on Wednesdays but for our purposes today, it is enough to know that there are some sources that debate whether Peter actually wrote the book.

When I raised these questions, some in our study were not happy. They did not like the fact that anyone could question the authorship of a book of the Bible. They wanted their bible nice and neat; cut and dried. The reason, however for raising the questions was not to cast doubt on the bible but to prepare us for conversations from others who might want to do just that. Unless we know the objections, unless we have studied the ways those objections can be overcome, we cannot defend our faith. We cannot offer an alternative to those who are in doubt. We live in a world looking for something and we have something to share. Our God is not a fraud! Our savior is not a stooge! Our word is authentic and we need to be able to demonstrate that! The only way we can do it is if we know what the word is and more importantly, if we live the truest meaning of the word.

The Pharisees wanted to cast doubt. They had rumor, they had innuendo, they had allegation, they had the power of the priesthood on their side. They were armed with the ways of the world but they failed to recognize what we learned from Cyrus this morning. God will use even that which is unknowing to present the knowledge that God is God and God will accomplish God's purposes according to God's will and plan! The Pharisees wanted to entrap Jesus using the tools of the world. What they failed to remember is that God's ways are not our ways and as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are God's ways above ours! (Is. 55)

So the Pharisees went away to devise a plan and they came back with the best they had to offer. They sent their disciples, those who believed as they did and were preparing to carry on the traditions of the Pharisees. They sent their disciples along with the Herodians. The Herodians were Roman loyalists. They would have been supporters of Herod who was a puppet king for Rome. They sent these two groups then, the Pharisaic pretenders and the status quo defenders to question Jesus; to try to trap him.

The trap question seemed innocent enough. It was set up with a series of affirmations intended to disarm Jesus, to encourage him to relax and be flattered as to their regard for him. "We know you are sincere," they said. We know you are earnest in your teaching, that you teach because of deeply held beliefs! You are a good teacher! "You teach the ways of God according to the truth." Nothing they have responded to so far indicates their desire to understand the God of truth and yet, they recognize Jesus as one who teaches that truth. Jesus points out God's call to God's people, God's invitation to be God's chosen people, God's grace when people reject not only him but His son. Jesus points out their failure to recognize Messiah because he acts and dresses differently from them. This is generally the truth he teaches. They reject it all and yet they affirm it!

Jesus shows no deference. He does not try to curry favor from those in a position to help his cause. He does not play favorites with those who might be able to donate more through their tithes and offerings.

Instead, he points out the false motivations demonstrating no partiality to any group of people! The disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians lift these up as positive qualities yet they have rejected each and every one of them. Is it any wonder Jesus sees through their subtlety! Jesus knows they are trying to make nice in order to entrap him and as one who teaches God's ways according to truth, he is offended!

Why do you put me to the test, he asks! You hypocrites, he calls them! Back in chapter 4, Jesus told Satan, "You shall not put the Lord, your God to the test!" God tells us this morning that even though Cyrus did not know God, God still used him to accomplish God's purposes! The disciples of the Pharisees did not know, did not believe they were talking to Messiah even though Jesus had demonstrated who he was to them and many others. His own disciples knew exactly who he was because they were willing to listen to the truth about the ways of God. The disciples of the Pharisees could not see because they were unwilling to believe the truth yet God used them! Just as God used Cyrus, an alien, a foreigner, a persecutor and oppressor, God used these disciples to reveal God's power!

We are not to put God to the test! We are to believe and trust God. He is the Lord, our God and there is none other, none beside him! God tells Cyrus this today and reminds us that God has told Satan this as well! God makes only one exception to this! In the book of the prophet Malachi, as God is talking to the people about how they give, about how they offer, God says, "Put me to the test!" God says, bring the full measure of your tithes and offerings and fill the storehouse so the full measure of your ministry might be accomplished and then, "see if I will not open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing on you such as you have never imagined!"

We are not to put God to the test except in the ways in which God commands us to put God to the test! God's command is to acknowledge the degree of trust we put in God as God! The Pharisee disciples and the Herodians are called hypocrites. In Chapter 6 of Matthew's gospel, we learn that hypocrites are actors, portraying their faith as a matter of public perception in order to curry favor with those who are beaten, broken and battered. Jesus recognizes their hypocrisy as they attempt to flatter him while at the same time attempting to embarrass and discredit him. As actors, they do not care about the truth, they care about their performance and making sure it is convincing. Because of their true motivation, they miss the moment where Jesus turns the tables on them!

"What do you think," they ask? "Is it lawful for us to pay a tax to the emperor or not?" Certainly they knew Jesus supported authority. He preached on authority and promoted the appropriate uses of power. Paul says in Romans 13 that we are to support our governments as the appropriate authority ordained by God. When the disciples of the Pharisees ask about a tax paid to the emperor, they put the dilemma to Jesus. Do we recognize the authority of Caesar or ignore that authority and give deference to God?

Jesus, as they have pointed out, shows no deference or partiality to any people and if he answers that we pay the tax then he defers to the authority of people. If he says we do not pay the tax then he is guilty of insurrection and attempted revolt! Jesus recognizes the dilemma. In this case, he is willing to be put to the test. He says, "show me the coin that is used to pay the tax." Immediately they give him a

denarius. When they give the coin, they demonstrate their loyalty and they demonstrate it to all who are watching.

The picture on the coin is of the emperor and the title is "Son of Augustus, divine son of God." The conversation between the disciples of the Pharisees and Jesus takes place in the courtyard of the temple. No Roman coin is to be exchanged or carried into the temple area because the Jews believe it is a violation of the first commandment that "You shall make no graven images." By producing the coin, the disciples acknowledge their true loyalty. They are supporters of the world and the images created in the world. They are branded as false teachers who do not practice what they preach! Jesus, on the other hand, by his failure to have such a coin acknowledges his own willingness to recognize God alone as the only true and divine ruler of the universe!

Later, at the time of crucifixion, these same disciples along with all of us would proclaim as Jesus was tried, "We have no king but the emperor." All of us would deny the very thing Jesus professes in this moment because all of us would be afraid of the world and the harshness of worldly punishment! We would fail the test of God! We would rob God of God's power to provide for us a blessing the likes of which we could not imagine! We would be branded in the same way the disciples of the Pharisees are branded. The truth of our faithfulness would be revealed!

Jesus, however would still give us an opportunity! He would remind us that while the face of the brand appears in one way, it is in reality something else entirely! At first glance, Jesus would say, the emperor's face appears on the coin but they you have to ask, "Who made the metal? Who made the stamp to brand the coin? Who gave the engraver the gift and talent to place an inscription on the coin?" The reality is that nothing in this world, not the people, the minerals, the talents, none of it belongs to the world or anyone living in it. Caesar can claim divinity but in the end, he dies! The face on the coin appears to be everlasting but in the end, it wears off! The inscription can be believed true but in the end, it proves false! The emperor owns nothing and controls nothing.

As God said to Cyrus who did not even know him, "I AM the Lord! There is none beside me!" God owns the cattle on a thousand hills and spoke and the world leapt into existence! God created all we need for our existence and God then created us! We are branded by God! We belong to God and God alone deserves all the praise, all the honor, all the glory! The brand born by all of God's creation is born most completely in God's crowing glory! We, humans, all of us bear the brand of God. We are created in God's image and likeness. We are inscribed with the title of God. We reveal this title as we "Love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind and as we love our neighbor as we love ourselves!" God's brand on us is worn, not with pride as is the head on an emperor's coin, but with humility as we serve one another, rendering only to Caesar our willingness to make our world a better place!

The disciples of the Pharisees and even the Herodians were amazed because Jesus pointed out to them that Caesar, even though he did not know God was still doing the will of God by creating a way for God to be recognized above all else and glorified beyond all else! They were amazed because they walked away bearing the brand of God and they knew it! They had been bested even before they asked their question because the very premise of the question was wrong. They were asking as actors; as

hypocrites but God does not deal with plays and drama. God deals with reality and the reality is God owns it all!

On this day, God walks up to the disciples of the Pharisees just as God walks up to us. "Howdy!" God says. How are you doing? God asks! He is not just being polite! He is being God and He asks because He cares! How can we respond? How can we acknowledge all we have because of him? God just wants one response from us. "Howdy!" Amen!