

**"Test Questions, Trick Questions, Trap Questions, and Trip Questions"**  
Matthew 22:15-22

One of the oldest tricks in the book has been pulled by older siblings on their younger brothers and sisters for generation after generation. It starts like this. The older child notices that the younger child has a quarter that he would like.

"I'll make you a deal." older child offers, "let's flip for it. Heads I win, tails you lose." The little kids agrees: "Sure!" Then when heads appears the older sibling proclaims "Heads, I win!" Of course if tails comes up the declaration is "Tails, you lose."

At this point it suddenly dawns on the younger child that this is truly a no-win situation. Whatever way the coin lands it's going to land in their sibling's pocket.

In this week's gospel text the Pharisees think they've concocted the perfect no-win question to present before Jesus: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" If Jesus says yes, he'll alienate all those who continued to struggle against Roman rule and who ardently believed Israel must only be obedient to God and God's Law. If, however, Jesus answers no, then he's immediately at odds with the Roman authorities and has identified himself as a dangerous, subversive opponent. Roman authorities could be counted on to deal swiftly with such a threat to national security.

However, let me be clear about something from the very beginning. There is nothing wrong with asking hard questions.

The Pharisees themselves were used to asking hard questions. Part of the positive role the Pharisees had chosen for themselves was to ask hard questions about how to apply God's Law to everyday life as a means of encouraging worship of God and obedience to God's Law as a part of the daily lives of common people.

The discussion, debate and endless questions over every nuance of God's Law became known as Midrash and has an honored place in Jewish spirituality to this day. It is a legacy of their rigorous inquiry and meticulous devotion. In the Gospels the Pharisees are often placed in a bad light, but they were really intent on challenging people to take God's word seriously in their daily lives. There is nothing wrong with asking hard questions, but the blind spot of rigor is that it can too easily become a smug self-righteousness.

Jesus recognized that. The challenge that Jesus gave to the Pharisees was to turn the questions on the questioners. Jesus never avoided or even evaded any tough question but he always reserved the right to ask an even tougher, more personal question of the questioner.

Sometimes we think of all the hard, puzzling questions that we are going to ask when we get to heaven. Do we spend as much time preparing for the questions that we will be asked? A man named Victor Frankl wrote a small book called Man's Search for Meaning. In it he says that many of us go through life looking for the answers to life from God, but in reality it is the other way around. The longer we live, life has a way of asking us more and more difficult and challenging questions. And the way we choose to live our lives are our answers to those questions.

Asking questions is part of the heritage of the church. The disciples spent their days in dialogue with Jesus, asking questions and discussing his answers. The Church has taken its role as questioner seriously and asks all those who would join the Body of Christ to answer a series of questions. Catechisms, confessions, and creeds are all taught by the Church as answers to the FAQs of Faith (Frequently Asked Questions).

The problem with the question that the Pharisees posed to Jesus in today's gospel text is that it was not a sincere question. It was not a question looking for an answer. It was a question designed to exclude and indict.

That's a problem plaguing us today as well. The church should be a place to ask questions, even the most difficult questions, to open the door to hard inquiry with loving courage and patient faithfulness. Instead, too often the church is busy asking trick questions or test questions designed to send the questioner out the door, or even trap questions designed to send the questioner down into dungeons. Let's look at these various types of questions.

1) There are Test Questions like "Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior?", "If you were to die tonight, are you certain you'd go to heaven?", "When did you accept Jesus into your heart?"

Test questions are at best biopsies of the soul, assessments of where you are on your spiritual journey. At their worst Test questions are a subtle way for us to play God by devising a checklist of judgments so that we can put someone else in a convenient spiritual category. We can be quite coy about this. We say, "I don't want to be judgmental, but ..." and then that is exactly what we go right ahead and do.

2) Then there are Trick Questions. Trick questions are often questions that ask "Why?" "Why did this happen to me?" It is not unusual to hear "Why/" questions asked after a disaster of any kind such as "Why did this have to happen?" Again, there is nothing wrong with asking "Why" questions, but they become a trick question when the question becomes a way of the questioner avoiding any kind of responsibility for a response to the tragedy in question. Trick questions are usually looking for someone or something else to blame.

Some saints learn to rise above these trick questions. When life wasn't going well for St. Teresa of Avila – she had chronically bad health - she complained to God, and asked the trick question, "Why do you treat me this way?" She heard a reply from God that took her aback. God told Saint Teresa, "I treat all my friends this way," She jotted down a response: "No wonder you have so few!" But Teresa of Avila never asked that question again.

I am not saying these questions are wrong. There are no wrong questions. I am suggesting that we need to question our questions, "Will this question move me closer to God and those I love?"

3) Then there are the Trap Questions, questions that once you ask them and seek answers, you may never be heard from again.

Here are a couple of my Trap Questions that, if I were to start unraveling them, a trap door would open and I'd be swallowed whole:

a) Why couldn't we have been born old and grow younger? b) Why sleep? I'm saving this one for when I get to heaven. You made life so short to begin with, God, why isn't sleep a design defect? You want us to spend one-third to one-half our life dead to the world, dead to life? c) Why death? No, I can come to terms with death. But why painful death, why slow death, why children's death, why the suffering of the innocent?

I remember my first late wife. She was ten years younger than I. We had just celebrated our third anniversary. We were making plans to adopt a child. I had never seen my wife happier than she was then. She was radiant, and then one week later she was diagnosed with cancer in the brain, a tumor the size of my thumb, that had metastasized from her lung, and the next nine months of her life were filled with excruciating suffering. I don't have an answer to the "Why" of all that.

You may have your own. They are deep questions, of ten the result of great suffering, that each have their place, but pursuing none of them will help to locate us in our journey of faith. They serve only to isolate us from God, from others, even from ourselves.

You start down these Trap Questions, and either the trap door will spring shut on you, or you end up living a line from Herman Melville, where he said that "the universe is one large practical joke, the wit thereof humans but dimly perceive."

4) The kind of questions Jesus asked, and taught us to ask, aren't Test Questions or Trick Questions or Trap Questions, but Trip Questions.

Trip questions send you on a journey, a life journey. Trip questions serve to locate where we are on our spiritual journey. They give us a sense of direction,

and they help us identify who will help us to get to where God wants us to go. A trip question is **an ask that leads to a task, a question that leads to a quest. Trip questions help us to identify who and whose we are.** Test, Trick, and Trap Questions tempt us to compare ourselves with others and exclude those of whom we are suspicious. But in fact, every Test, Trick, and Trap Question can be transformed into a Trip Question. For example, when I ask the trick question, “Why am I going through this?” “Why me? Why me?” The Holy Spirit can transform that question into “LORD, here I am, you know where I am, what can I learn from you today?” Even the most challenging of circumstances can be transformed into “LORD, what are the possibilities here? What doors are you opening?”

So what about the trick question that the Pharisees asked Jesus? Jesus answered their question about paying taxes by asking a question of his own. Smart guy. He asked for a coin used to pay the tax. What goes unsaid when they seemed to have no trouble in producing one of these denarius is that merely by being in possession of a coin with the image of Ceasar they were being disobedient to God’s law, but never mind that, Jesus is not trying to play gotcha with some religious technicality. He asks them whose likeness is on the coin, whose image, whose portrait. When they answered, “The emperor’s” he quickly replied “Give therefore to the emperor what belongs to the emperor” and then he adds “Give to God the things that are God’s.”

I think that leads to another question, a question for each of us as well as the Pharisees, “Where do we find God’s likeness? Where do we find the image of God?” We celebrated/are celebrating an infant baptism this morning. In that sacrament we celebrate that this child is created in the image and likeness of God. In Baptism we say that is the most central part of our identity. In God’s love it is who each one of us are created to be. Now that is not too tough to believe in an infant baptism, but as life goes along it can get more challenging, and Jesus recognizes that.

Do you remember at the end of Matthew’s gospel Jesus tells about when the Son of Man will come in glory and the great question at the end of our journey will be “Did you recognize me when you saw me?” Is this a test question, a trick question, a trap question, or a trip question? I will let you decide that, but one thing is clear, Jesus is not mysterious here. He gives us the answer.

He says in essence, “Find the neediest person you can find. He doesn’t say anything about looking for the cutest baby, or the most powerful person, or the most talented, or the richest, or the most glamorous, or even the most moral, come to think of it.” He says “Look for the hungriest, look for the neediest and thirstiest, the one least able to look after themselves, the sickest, look for the most guilty, look for the one most in need of forgiveness.”

Can you recognize my likeness in that person, in those people? The question is not even just one of recognition, but did you respond? That is a real Trip question for each of us individually and as a church. The choices we make in our life are our answer to that question.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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