

Gotcha? Nope.
 First Reading: Psalm 96
 Second Reading: Matthew 22:15-22

There are a number of things that fathers hope to pass on to their children — faith, family, citizenship, work ethic, kindness — all things that mothers also desire for their children. Yet, there are other things that dads hope their children will inherit from them that justifiably trigger most mom’s to roll their eyes and groan, movie quotes that to many dads are precious as pearls, and suitable to insert whenever social settings offer an opening, quotes that immediately spur an interactive litany of movie dialogue among this less evolved of genders.

To wit, allow our dads here today to demonstrate our shared lexicon of movie mirth. Dads, I’ll say the quote and you respond with the name of the movie: “Leave the gun, take the cannoli” – *The Godfather*; “The llama says, ‘There won't be any money, but when you die, on your deathbed, you will receive total consciousness.’ So I got that goin' for me, which is nice” – *Caddyshack* (In their heads, every dad in here right now is saying, *gunga, gunga-lagunga*). And finally, from the most quotable movie of my youth: “strange women lyin' in ponds distributin' swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the

masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony — *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Ah! The French guard at the English palace, the knights of Nih, the killer rabbit, the man claiming a witch turned him into a newt — Mention one phrase from any scene in a circle of dads, and as if possessed, they will proceed to recite almost the entire movie script.

Do you remember the keeper at the bridge of death? “Who would cross the Bridge of Death must answer me these questions three, ere the other side he see.” After Lancelot gets the easy question (“What is your favorite color”), King Arthur is presented with a doozy: “What... is the air-speed velocity of an unladen swallow?”

It is posed as a gotcha question, and though the king outsmarts the bridge keeper in *Monty Python*, very often gotcha questions succeed in humiliating us in our pretensions, exposing our blind spots, our lack of knowledge, our misinformed bias, our confusion, our weakness, our insecurities. Candidates on the campaign trail, participants in a public debate, witnesses in a trial, coaches in the press room — all are frequently the targets of gotcha questions.

Have you ever been on the receiving end of one? When examined for ordination before 300 people at a Presbytery meeting, from out of nowhere someone asked me to explain the theological ramifications of a much publicized controversy involving an unnamed clergy couple south of the city. This was 1987, and though not named, it was obvious the inquisitor was referring to Jim and Tammy Faye Baker at Heritage USA. Though I recall the sensation of all the blood draining from my body, I remember nothing about my response. They still let me in the club of clergy, but it was definitely a gotcha grenade.

Gotcha questions are never pleasant and always constitute a frontal assault. They are not questions asked in search of information. Rather, they are an attempt to find the vulnerabilities in an adversary's armor. It is an ancient weapon of wits, and even the Son of God was not exempt from the gotcha grenade. *"Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians..."*

Now, if you grew up in the church, you've sort of developed a Pavlovian impulse to hiss whenever the Pharisees are mentioned, and that negative stereotype has probably been a bit unfair. The Pharisees were a

group of stalwart, Torah loving, temple going, set in their ways, pious to a fault, faith apologists wary of anything or anyone associated with the words *new* or *innovative* or *change*. You know the type. You may be a Pharisee. If not, you are certainly related to one — it's the grandma who refuses the gift of a cell phone saying, "I just don't cotton to all these changes;" it's the neighbor who's always putting stakes on the property lines and signs in the fescue — Keep your dog off my grass, or I'll put my boot up... well, you get the picture, he's memorized the neighborhood covenants and never misses a homeowners' meeting or city council vote; it's the legalistic Sunday school class that's still up in arms 20 years after being moved to a smaller classroom where there are always plenty of empty chairs.

I encountered that once in a church. We were new to the congregation and were invited to a dinner hosted by a Sunday school class that had been meeting for 40 years. After dessert was served, they pushed the card tables to the side and placed the chairs in a circle. I could feel my anxiety spiking, sensing that what was taking shape was either an inquisition or a firing squad. Bless 'em Lord. They proceeded to give me an unfiltered and exhaustive history of the class. Forty years earlier they held monthly dinners attended regularly by fifty couples, a glorious blossoming of the kingdom of

God, but the years passed and their numbers tanked. And then without a survey, feasibility study, or vote, my predecessor as pastor had “stolen” their classroom and given it to the children (*whose numbers were far greater than this small remnant of their class*). You could hear the indignance in their voices. And then came the gotcha question – How do you feel about such persecution against us, and what are you going to do about it?

I’m pretty sure my answer failed them, but somehow I survived. Not all Pharisees wear sandals and long robes, trapped in amber since the first century. If you can quote the second bullet point of Section D on the fifth page of a dust-covered policy because you just can’t let go of a challenge to a treasured tradition ... you might be a Pharisee. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day were not bad people. They were faithful people who held a little too tightly to a narrow reading of a law, a scripture, a policy, or a tradition. And Jesus was the biggest challenge to their resolute, not to be questioned convictions.

“Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.’”

That, friends is textbook duplicity that would fool no one. “Matt, I truly believe you could play in the NBA.” *Really?* The Pharisees greeting was patently disingenuous. They didn’t believe a word they were saying, and Jesus knew they didn’t believe a word they were saying.

Ironically, though, their words constituted perhaps the clearest truths about Jesus spoken in the Gospels. Jesus was sincere. Jesus did teach the way of God. Jesus was truth itself. Jesus was intimidated by no one nor fooled by anyone. And Jesus did not show partiality. No one is excluded from his attention, concern, or love. The Pharisees were spot on in characterizing this Jesus, they just could not accept the idea that Jesus might just be who their words described. Jesus challenged the convictions to which they clung.

And so, just as we regularly do when we pray, the Pharisees sought to outsmart the Lord with a question. *“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”* It’s the kind of question asked with a smirk, like a high noon gunslinger stepping arrogantly out into the street, knowing he has the upper hand. It’s Clint Eastwood looking down at the criminal, “Go ahead, make my day.” It’s district attorney Trotter, in *My*

Cousin Vinny, ambushing Mona Lisa Vito on the witness stand with a gotcha question on the ignition timing of a 327 cubic-inch engine with a four barrel carburetor.

The Pharisees figure they have Jesus pinned, knowing either answer he gives will condemn him. *Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?* If Jesus answers yes, the Zealots will come after him because Jesus' yes would signal support for Rome, the evil occupying force. If Jesus says no, he'll get nailed for sedition, for fomenting revolution. *Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?* Yes or No? If he's a preacher, he's thinking, *I think I'll use another text!* Yet, as with *My Cousin Vinny's* star witness, Mona Lisa Vito, the inquisitors do not understand who they are up against. Her knowledge of auto engines exceeded the district attorney's by a couple of brains at the least. The Pharisees truly did not understand to whom they were talking.

Gotcha? Nope. Jesus will not satisfy the Pharisees intent. Jesus asks to see the coin with which the tax is paid. *"They brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.'* Then he said to them, *'Give therefore to the emperor the things that*

are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Cue the mic drop.

"When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away."

Jesus would not be boxed in any human construct. Jesus would not be captive to any movement, ideology, political party, social clique, or team. In the Gospel of John, when facing Pontius Pilate, history's poster child for governing power, Jesus says, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over..." As agendas are pursued, the self-righteous are always seeking to claim Jesus would surely choose their team, their party, their opinion, their point of view, and questions are raised — Would Jesus be a Democrat? Would Jesus be a Republican? Would Jesus reject Communism? Would Jesus be a vegan? Would Jesus drive an electric car, wear Nikes or Birkenstocks, drink scotch or Mountain Dew, sing hymns or praise songs, be Church of God or Presbyterian, send a text or write a handwritten note? Any such questions are in vain.

Jesus won't play that game, satisfy that want, toe that line. The whole premise of the Pharisees' question is wrong. The real question is not whether Jesus agrees with you, but whether you are following Jesus. *"Give*

*therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's..." I read that this week and I wondered whether Jesus was, in a way, intimating something like — *Hey, don't drag me into the mess you've made running this place. You are going to have to clean that up. The real issue is, regardless of your government's flaws, is whose image, whose teachings, whose life witness, whose way will govern how you will live and who you will be as you navigate your way through this crazy world, no matter who the principalities and powers are.**

The Reformed Tradition, the Presbyterian Church has always encouraged, not partisanship, but citizenship. In *A Declaration of Faith*, it says, "We must not equate the Christian faith with any nation's way of life or with opposition to the ideologies of other nations. We hold Christians are to be law-abiding citizens unless the state commands them to disobey God." The Confession of 1967 warns: "the church which identifies the sovereignty of any one nation or any one way of life with the cause of God denies the Lordship of Christ and betrays its calling." The Principles of Order in our Book of Order state: "we also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which people of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to

exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.” Don’t assume your ways are God’s ways. Pray that you may discern Christ’s ways as you navigate this world

Jesus refused to be boxed in, particularly by the self righteous. This week I read an article written by a retired journalist who challenged those who would succeed him to remember — “We must be more impressed by what we don’t know than by what we know, or think we know.”^(Martin Baron, *The Atlantic*) The same charge could be directed toward the Pharisees, the church, you, and me. We never own the truth, we only seek to follow the truth as we see it revealed in Jesus Christ, the One who confessed: *“the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* Wasn’t Jesus’ life the very embodiment of the prophet Micah’s challenge? *“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly before your God?”* If that doesn’t shape you into a better citizen, nothing will.

What was Jesus’ challenge to the Pharisees? *“Give to God the things that are God’s.”* Well, that silenced the Pharisees and they walked away. I hope we won’t. I hope we stay with Jesus. I hope that we can muster the

courage to ask Jesus another question. I hope that we will linger long enough with Jesus to ask — What is God's? The answer to that question, we will find, is the way to life. Amen.