

## 24A 2023

The Herodians mentioned in today's gospel were a group of hellenistic Jews.

That means that they had descended from people who had adopted the Greek culture and language during the reign of Alexander the Great, prior to the arrival of the Romans.

As a group, they held great power.

They were so named because of their support of the Herods, the Roman puppet kings who ruled over Israel.

In contrast, the Pharisees despised Roman control because they thought that it hindered the full flourishing of Judaism as they understood it.

The Herodians and the Pharisees thus agreed on little other than their dislike of Jesus.

This was because Jesus always put God/love/relationship/honesty first, which threatened to shake up the social order.

What would happen if everyone started loving one another?

The people who like to control us would lose their power.

Of course, it is not going to happen anytime soon, but the mere thought of an outbreak of love is enough to cause anxiety among people who trade in fear and manipulation.

Whatever we value most dictates how we behave.

The Herodians and Pharisees therefore are willing to act in opposition to their stated values to preserve their position.

Jesus' commitment to truth, on the other hand, meant that he is perfectly willing to call out the Herodians and Pharisees.

He sees through their flattering words.

“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.”

He brushes this flattery aside and states plainly that they are questioning him not because they wish to benefit from his wisdom, but because they want to trap him.

He then adds bluntly that they are being hypocrites.

Despite what they claim to value, they are insincere, do not act in accordance with truth, and show deference to those who will help them maintain their positions.

They may indeed value truth at some level, but Jesus knows that they value something even more.

They want to maintain power and wealth and, with whatever room is left over, do what God wants.

To put this in contemporary terms, we Americans pay taxes, follow laws, vote, but those things should never take priority over God/love/relationship/honesty.

I put these things together as one concept because they are.

God *is* love, and there is no love without *relationship*, and relationships are only *real* when they are honest.

God/love/relationship/honesty are part of a single movement, we might say.

When we value anything above God, we are willing to betray relationships in order to acquire or to keep that thing.

For example, NA teaches that addicts who are not in recovery put drugs first.

We are, in other words, always an addict's second best friend, at best.

The substance comes before us.

An addict may be a wonderful friend as long as one does not come between that person and the substance, but will choose the substance over us, maybe when we need him or her most.

Similarly, many widows and widowers have told me that, once their spouses died, they were no longer welcome among their group of friends, which had consisted of couples.

Their companions valued something more than the friendship.

It is painful to find out at the very hour of one's need that one's friends are not the friends one thought they were.

If this kind of betrayal happens to us, we need to be gentle with ourselves because it can be hard to recognize what someone else's values are in advance.

We usually do not realize what someone's top priority is until something comes into conflict with it and they reveal themselves.

Up to that point, people might have seemed like the best friends one could have.

We all get fooled.

Being in relationship means accepting this risk.

If we try to protect ourselves by rejecting all relationships, we merely succeed in spreading out the pain over time.

I encourage you, when you read a novel or watch a film, think about what the various characters value most.

When someone betrays another, think of what is most important to the betrayer.

Is it money, power, reputation, family opinion, stability?

Consider how it affects their behavior.

Do their values change over time?

I think you will find it interesting.

We see the results of this playing out right now all over the world.

People who value power and money over people and relationships are fighting and threatening to fight.

The frustrating thing is, we cannot change them any more than we can convince a person to give up an addiction.

People must come to that determination themselves.

All we can do is to refuse to enable.

Ultimately, only a reassessment of their own priorities will let God in, whether they call it God or not.

I find that it is useful to have a clear word for it—God—but some have been taught such an objectionable image of God that they find it impossible to adopt the word.

It is our role to be the best we can be and to pray that others will learn from that example.

The best we can be means being as fully ourselves as possible, as comfortable in our own skin, as honest with others, as present to others as they allow.

Being a good Christian is not about being the upholder of ancient values, a certain social order found in antiquity.

It is about being present to God and to others and trusting God's leadership in each moment, which may lead in unexpected directions.

Jesus was turning society on its head.

We followers of Jesus are to remain open to one another, open to ideas.

It is important that we *understand* others, not that we indoctrinate them.

We will never be perfect, but we can value relationships above all else, which is to say,  
we can place love first, place God first.

It is OK to value other things, too, but those things must come second or third.