



## **“Mousetraps”**

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***Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 16, 2011  
Matt. 22:15–22 (NRSV)***

One warm fall afternoon when my twin sister, Marlene, and I were young—probably about the age of four or five—we spent the afternoon at our Grandma Nehring’s house in town while our father was busy at the co-op settling up about the harvest.

Grandma’s house contained a treasure-trove of sights, sounds, and smells, and offered opportunities that were different from our daily routine. On this particular fall day that I’m remembering, Marlene and I wandered into Grandma’s pantry where she kept her bread box and baking supplies, homemade and store-bought candy, a gunny sack full of potatoes, a bag of nuts that she had cracked and picked for baking, and a week’s worth of home-canned fruits and vegetables that she had brought up from the cellar.

Marlene and I learned quickly that we were not the only visitors to Grandma’s pantry. As it turned out, some small gray creatures with long skinny tails and little pink feet were also known to wander in there, so that Grandma had to keep a trap set under the pantry counter in anticipation of such eventualities.

I first saw Grandma’s pantry mousetrap when I was too young to know what it was. How I learned about mousetraps was that I picked up Grandma’s trap that day, and carried it into the kitchen where she was baking, and while she still had her back to me, I asked, “Grandma, what’s this?”

Grandma turned around to see what I was asking about, and panicked when she saw the trap in my hand. She quickly grabbed it from me for fear that it would smash my fingers. It didn’t. Unfortunately, however, it smashed hers. Grandma grabbed the trap out of my hand, and in doing so, the metal clasp slammed shut on her thumb.

She never forgot that incident. Neither did I.

We all learned some valuable lessons that day: Marlene and I learned about the dangers of mousetraps, and Grandma learned about the dangers of placing mouse-traps where young grandchildren (and their grandparents) could become ensnared.

## II

The gospel lesson today illustrates how the Pharisees set a trap for Jesus, but rather than stepping into their trap, he handed it back to them.

According to Mathew, the story goes like this:

The Pharisees sent leaders from the synagogue and Herodians (people who were loyal to Caesar) and they asked Jesus a trick tax question. "Tell us...what you think, Jesus. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Jesus was on to the Pharisee's tricks. He knew that their question was a trap, so he asked them a counter question, "Why are you putting me to the test...? Show me the coin used for the tax."

The Pharisees then brought Jesus a denarius (a Roman coin, with the image of Emperor Tiberius impressed upon it.)

When he saw it, Jesus asked them, "Whose head is on this coin, and whose title?"

The Pharisees replied, "The emperor's."

Then Jesus said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

When they heard this, the Pharisees were amazed; and they left him and went away.<sup>1</sup>

The Pharisees' "Jesus trap" was an elaborate scheme involving those who were part of the religious status quo and those who favored the political status quo. The question that the religious leaders, who were known as Pharisees, asked Jesus was designed to divide the crowd that was growing around him.

If Jesus said, "no" to taxes, then those who were faithful to God would be pleased, and those who were loyal to Caesar would throw him jail.

Conversely, if Jesus said, "yes" to taxes, then those who were loyal to Caesar would be pleased, because they skimmed revenue from the pot before paying Caesar his due, and those who were loyal to God would abandon their allegiance to Jesus, because they believed that there was only one God, and that paying taxes to Caesar was tantamount to worshipping another deity.

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<sup>1</sup> Mt. 22:15-22.

The mistake that the Pharisees made in setting their trap for Jesus was that they thought they could force him to publicly choose between one or the other—between God and Cesar—but they were wrong. Jesus wouldn't take the bait.

Instead, Jesus handed the Pharisees' giant mousetrap right back to them by challenging them to answer the values question that they had posed to him: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?

### III

As it turns out, the world is full of mousetraps, and Pharisees and Herodians, and relentless challenges that require us to clarify our values by the words that we choose and the actions that we take.

For example, I've been intrigued by the whole "Occupy Wall Street" phenomenon that began with protests in New York City last month, and that went global this past weekend. Perhaps this phenomenon has captured your attention too.

According to a Reuters news report yesterday, the Occupy Wall Street Movement has been gathering steam over the past month, and was originally designed to culminate in a day of action yesterday. These worldwide protests, according to Reuters, were mostly peaceful, except in Rome, where the demonstration sparked a riot.

Critics of the Occupy Movement claim that the people behind it have no clear message, and they question whether the effort can sustain momentum beyond this weekend.

Despite criticisms that the movement has no clear message, it seems to me that at least a few messages have come through loud and clear. The Occupiers are furious about at least these reasons:

- 1) They are furious that our nation has spent \$1T on the bank bailouts, while millions of Americans who received over-valued mortgages have not received any mercy from the very banks that received these federal funds when their financing system collapsed and brought on the Great Recession.
- 2) The Occupiers are furious that employment and underemployment continue to run at rates higher than previously experienced in the past twenty-five years. They are furious that most people who became unemployed during the recession have been out of work for two years or more. And they are furious that the people who have gone back to work are typically working for lower wages and fewer benefits, and that more people than ever are working on a contract basis rather than in open-ended employment situations.

- 3) Furthermore, the Occupiers are furious that the richest 1% of Americans (who receive 25% of all income and own 40% of the nation's wealth)<sup>2</sup> still do not pay their fair share in taxes.<sup>3</sup>

In short, the Occupiers' overall message is that America (and the world) needs a more equitable and just economic system.

#### IV

I have been pondering the question this past week, "Why now?" Why is the Occupy Movement happening now—why not at some earlier point in our history?"

The hypothesis that I have developed after reviewing news accounts and social analyses of these events is that the Occupy Movement has arisen now, because the Great Recession has affected more of those who have historically been immune to economic downturns—meaning that more white, middle-class, college-educated professionals have been affected by the downturn in the global market than at previous times in our nation's history. In other words, the traditionally "upwardly mobile" have become suddenly "downwardly mobile."

Meanwhile, those who have historically borne the brunt of economic downturns in disproportionate amounts (such as African Americans, Hispanics, and first-generation immigrants) continue to experience these hardships in ever-increasing ways in current times.<sup>4</sup>

I don't agree with every way that the Occupiers have tried to convey their message about the need for economic change in our world, but I do agree that their message is one that the world needs to hear and to act on. And, furthermore, I believe that the Occupiers' message isn't just a message for Wall Street—for the amorphous industrial military complex that the Hippies rallied against—rather, the Occupiers' message is a message for all of us, including the protestors themselves.

Part of the irony for me in the whole Occupy Wall Street phenomenon is that this movement is dependent upon social media tools like Facebook and Twitter, and telephone networks like Verizon, which are owned and operated by multi-national corporations. This movement is dependent upon these organizing and communication tools to get their messages across to the wider public—and these tools are, well, they are establishment tools—and using them isn't, particularly anti-establishment.

So, the world is full of mousetraps, and it's harder than some may think to avoid getting your thumb, or maybe even your whole self, caught in the trap of paying allegiance to Cesar, or to the Almighty Dollar, or both.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.vanityfair.com/society/features/2011/05/top-one-percent-201105>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/10/16/us-usa-wallstreet-protests-ny-idUSTRE79F05F20111016>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/01/state\\_of\\_minorities.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/01/state_of_minorities.html)

So what's a Christian to do? Should we pay taxes to Cesar? Should we Occupy Wall Street?

Maybe yes. Maybe no.

What would Jesus do?

Jesus didn't pontificate. He handed the moral dilemma back to his disciples.

So we modern followers must discern. We must decide. We must act.

In the case of Occupy Wall Street, my sense is that this movement is not only a quest for economic change in our world; it is on an even deeper level a quest for membership in a moral community—and a quest for the spiritual change that would grow from participation in such an enclave.

This quest for membership in a moral community is described by Harvard University Ph.D. candidate Marisa Egerstrom in her blog post on CNN's BeliefBlog, "My Take: Occupy Wall Street Looks a Lot Like Church to Me," October 7, 2011.<sup>5</sup>

Egerstrom observes that millions of people have stepped out of the shadows of their private suffering in recent weeks to rally and camp in public squares and talk with one another about the ways that their personal struggles are bound up in the larger economic and political struggles unfolding in our nation and world, and to talk about how these struggles ultimately reflect a struggle for America's soul.

This movement outward from the private shadows of suffering into the public square of struggle, I believe, reflects a radical shift from the "me-me-me-me generation" and the procurers of "my personal spirituality" that have previously defined the character of America, toward an identity of persons who are part of an "us generation" that has realized that the wellbeing of individuals is bound up in the wellbeing of the collective, and that our nation's wellbeing is inextricably intertwined with the wellbeing of every nation in the world.

I hope I'm right about this, because God knows that this quest for participation in a moral community and this shift from "me" to "us" is long overdue.

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/10/07/my-take-occupy-wall-street-looks-like-church-to-me/?iref=allsearch>

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