

25th Sunday after Pentecost
"Jesus' Final Exam"
Luke 20:27-38

Have you ever had a dream about a time when you were in school taking an exam? And it's the kind of dream where something goes wrong: like after studying all night for the test and you get to school the next morning and find out you had studied the wrong chapter!

During the final week of Jesus' young life, as he moved toward the cross, Jesus was put to the test. Luke, chapter 20, tells of Jesus' exam, Jesus' final exam.

It was a three-part test, consisting of three essay questions.

Tension has been building throughout Luke's Gospel. Now Luke tells us that those who were most threatened by Jesus, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, were looking for a way to arrest Him.

In verse 20, just before today's Gospel reading, Luke shows us what has been going on behind the scenes.

In verse 20, he writes:

"Keeping a close watch on Jesus,
(the teachers of the law, and the chief priests), sent spies,
who pretended to be honest.

They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said, so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor."

So these spies came to Jesus to deliver his final exam, an exam by the way, that carried some pretty high stakes.

If Jesus flunked the exam, it wasn't getting an 'F' on a report card that he had to worry about, if he flunked, it was a matter of life or death.

Question, number one.

"Teacher, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

This question comes in verse 22, right before today's Gospel but it's all part of the same exam. And like the others, it's a trick question.

In fact, it's a set up.

If Jesus answers "No," the Romans will label him a Jewish revolutionary and kill him. If he answers "Yes," the religious leaders will say he has defiled God, because paying taxes to Caesar is to pay with the idolatrous coinage stamped with Caesar's pagan image—a crime for any faithful Jew.

Jesus, though, aware of their cunning little trap, answers their question with another question.
 “Do you have a coin on you?” he asks.
 They produce a denarius.

“Whose picture do you see on this coin?” he asks.
 “Why, Caesar’s,” they say.

“Well, that settles it,” says Jesus, giving them one of the greatest non-answers of all time.
 “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s, but give to God what is God’s.”

Behind this exchange is an answer.

The religious leaders have one of Caesar’s idolatrous coins on them, while Jesus’ pockets are empty.
 They are examining Jesus about his stance toward the Roman occupation forces in Judea, while they are collaborating with the Romans.

They carry Caesar’s coins—which become silent, but irrefutable proof of their own compromised faith.

Exam question, # 2.

In verse, 27, where today’s Gospel reading picks up, a fresh team of examiners shows up —the Sadducees.

Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees deny the resurrection of the dead.
 So in their clever exam question, they hope to kill two birds with one stone:
 The Pharisees are their rivals, so they hope to take down both Jesus and the Pharisees because they both believe in the resurrection of the dead.

“Teacher,” they said, “If a man dies, leaving a widow without children.
 And in obedience to the law, she marries his brother, but the brother dies as well.
 And if this two-time widow marries a third brother and he dies,
 and so on through a total of seven brothers and seven funerals.

Question—whose wife will she be after the resurrection?

This one wasn’t on the study sheet.
 It’s a tough one. It makes the resurrection seem like a foolish idea.
 The poor woman can’t be married to all seven brothers at once.
 And it doesn’t seem right for her to be married to only one.
 So what’s the answer?

Jesus again throws the whole thing back in the face of his examiners.

The resurrection isn't foolish, as you suppose. **You** are the ones who are thick headed, he says to the Sadducees.

Jesus is talking here about the resurrection of the dead, not just an extension of all the old, unjust, unequal social arrangements of the Pharisees and Sadducees...man-made laws which treated women as if they were the property of this man or that man.

The resurrection, Jesus is saying, is God's re-working of everything we've messed up. It's a whole, new, God-created ballgame, where the old rules don't apply.

In verse 39 and 40, just following today's reading it says,
 "Some of the teachers of the law responded, "Well said, teacher."
 And no one dared to ask him any more questions.

So what happened to the third exam question?

The exam isn't over.

This time it's Jesus who has an exam question for the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and for each of us here today. He turns and he asks them a question, about himself. He asks them, "What do you think about the Christ, the one who is the Messiah?"

He wants to know if they have any idea who He is. Because this question, "Who do you say that I am?" is the only exam question that matters.

That's the only question that mattered for the Pharisees and the Sadducees and it's the only question that matters for us.

There are times when we come to Jesus with our own exam questions. There are times when we are going through a personal crisis or a difficult time and we end up blaming God. At those times, like the Pharisees, our lack of faith comes out and leads us to question God.

There are also those of us who have gone through a time of intellectually rejecting God. We may hold ourselves at a distance, like the Sadducees, asking hypothetical questions questions that are not meant to search for the truth, but rather to hide from it.

But just like the exam they tried to give Jesus, Jesus will always have the last word. Jesus will ask you the only exam question that matters, "Who do you say that I am?"

And your answer will make all the difference in the world. Amen.