

It is a well known and incontrovertible fact that I spoil my dog. I wish I could say that this is simply a product of the fact that Scully is getting a bit older and so I want to give her what she wants so she's happy and content, but alas, Scully pretty much tied me around her finger from the second her little eight pound self plopped into my lap and started eating my shoelaces. There is an art to Scully getting what she wants. She knows there are multiple tactics to utilize and depending on the day, she puts them into action with just full force energy.

There is the...I'm just going to be so cute and sweet and cuddly that you have to give me what I want. Mom, look at how sweet I am sitting here, clearly you don't want to move me so *you* can sit where you want. Mom, I am so tired and it's cold and my lil joints are a smidge sore, so what if you lifted me up into my chair this morning as opposed to making me jump? Mom, it's so chilly and I'm just a little dog, you know you want to share your blanket so that I'm also warm. Mom, I'm just going to nestle my head on your knee while you eat dinner and if, ya know, you feel inclined to share just a little bit, that would make me so happy. It's hard to say no to that!

But then there is the tactic that is brought out far more often in our house...the I am going to annoy the ever-living bejeezus out of you until I have worn you down so hard that you just give me what you want. Mom,

you're home and have been gone all day and I am going to bark as loudly as I can until you pay the welcome home toll. Mom, I already had a snack but look your shoes are right there and what if I just flung them around the living room because ya know *you* left them there and I'll put them down if I get another snack. Mom, it is 4:01 and I usually get my walks at 4:00 and so I'm going to whine incessantly and paw at your book until you move so I can have my walk. Mom, you just brought home a new bag of candy corn and clearly I can see it sitting up there on the counter and if you're having some then clearly I need to have some too. Mom, what if I was just the most annoying dog on earth and you could make it stop if you just give me one more single solitary snack...until the next time I want one. It's impossible to say no to that because you just want it to stop.

This is the reality of my life, Scully gets what she wants because she has perfected the art of putting you in a no win situation. You give in to the cute and the annoying, well then you prove it works and the cycle continues. You refuse the annoying in particular and well, you will simply debate purchasing ear plugs because you will hear nothing for the rest of your life but the incessant whining of your dog if you don't give in. There's no good answer, there's no winning formula, unless of course you just leave the house, walk away from the cute and the annoying and give yourself a few

minutes of peace, not always the best solution, but in the grand scheme of our gospel, kind of one that Jesus buys into a little bit. When all else fails just walk away leaving them stunned and unsure what just happened.

The gospel just keeps on building on top of itself over the last couple of weeks, and you can feel, not only the tension, but Jesus' annoyance mounting. He keeps tussling back and forth with the authorities and giving them more intense parables that lay out the fact that things are really going to go great for them because of how they're treating him, and each time they try to find just the right come back to finally get Jesus where they want him. This week, they finally think they have it. An impossible question! A no win question! No matter what he says, they're going to get what they want. Whether they go for cute or annoying, that biscuit is going to be theirs.

They approach Jesus and the smarm is just dripping off of them in condescending waves. They lay it on so thick it's a wonder anyone could actual see through the fog around them. "Teacher, we *know* that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth..." Like let us butter you up as much as possible and remind the crowds that *you* claim that you only tell the truth according to God and if that's the case, you have to answer the questions we're going to ask truthfully, faithfully, and sincerely.

You can practically picture the snickers and Disney villain eyebrow work going on in this scene, that's how ridiculous this is.

So then they lay the question out, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? Now, in our 21st century context, we're like, umm, is this even a question? You don't pay your taxes, the IRS is coming for you, and it's just not really an option. You pay your taxes. End of story. This question is a bit more sticky in first century Israel. Jesus, the man who claims he is the Son of God, the Messiah, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? If he says yes, well then how can he be the Messiah? How can he claim to be a man of Israel, a Galilean, if he is so willing to be league with the empire. You think we should pay our taxes? You think we should support the emperor? Yet, you want us to believe you're God's chosen and doing what is right for God's people? Ok, Roman sympathizer, we're done here. But if he says no? Oh...well, well, well, what do we have here, treason. We shouldn't pay our taxes? You're openly inciting rebellion. You know what we do to rebels and insurrectionists don't you? Seems like we finally have the grounds we've been looking for to arrest you. Thank you so much for time and sincerely answering the question, traitor.

They think they have Jesus backed into a corner, there is no way out, they are finally going to get what they want, he will either be entirely

discredited and the crowds will turn on him or they can arrest him, either way it's a win for them. And then Jesus being Jesus, he just turns the tables. He asks for a denarius and then asks whose image is upon it. The crowds say Caesar, and Jesus is like, well ok, give to the emperor what belongs to him, and give to God what belongs to God, mic drop, end of story. No biscuit for you, because neither tactic worked.

This is yet again one of those gospels where we want to be like oh yeah, Jesus, drop that mic, you showed them, when in reality, more often than not, we're in the position of the Pharisees, bargaining with Jesus and with God to get an answer we want to hear about how we live our lives. We want the answers we want to hear, not the actual, sincere and honest truth. Jesus, you say to love our neighbors as ourselves, but what if that neighbor did something bad to us first? Oh shoot, right, forgive seventy times seven. Ok, well, what if we've forgiven that many times and we're still mad? Oh, right, ok, turn the other cheek. Well, wait, we forgot to mention, that person that did something bad to us, well they're gay, what now? Oh...love your neighbor are yourself. Ok, they're undocumented, what about that? Oh...care for the widows, aliens, and orphans among you. Ok, they're a different race! That has to be something. Oh...right...God sent you to the Gentiles too. Ok, this has to be the kicker...they're an atheist. Yeah, what

now? Oh...give to God what is God's and all people belong to God and so well, even if they're faith is different or even non-existent or I don't understand it...they belong to God. Ok...well...what if...

We tie ourselves up in these knots, perpetually combing through scripture desperately trying to justify our every feeling, our every decision our every belief, social, political, economic, and yet somehow, Jesus always comes back with the same answer, we just work really hard to ignore it. Love your neighbor as yourself and give to God the things that are God's, and the reality is...*everything*, every human being on this planet regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, belief system, political party belong to God, so we're never going to find the trip up question where God is like oh you know what, you're right, I totally missed that angle, yeah you can ignore them, they don't count.

The world we live in is fraught, and we are constantly put in positions where it *feels* like our faith and the way we live just have to be in conflict with each other. And yet, that's the rub of what Jesus says to the Pharisees here, there are going to be things that are done simply because that is the way of the world, but how you operate within them should *always* be informed by your faith, because at the end of the day, you and everything single thing you interact with during the day belongs to God, end of story.

So yeah, you have to vote, and sometimes voting can be sticky and hard and frustrating, where is your faith informing your life and your choices? Yeah, you have to deal with people at work and in the world that are just going to flat out make you want to scream, where is your faith informing how you communicate with them? Yeah, you have to pay your taxes, but how is your faith informing your fiscal responsibility and what you do with the gifts you have been given in this world? Yeah, you have to function as a human being in a world that is rife with conflict and confusion, where is your faith informing how you function?

In short, what call are you letting faith have upon your life? Are you ignoring it so that you can go about your business and do what you want, and then come here on a Sunday morning, confess it all and start all over again on Monday? Or are you taking a conscious look throughout your day and saying, my faith is calling me here. Maybe I don't post this snarky, clap back comment on Facebook. Maybe I don't tune out the person who is trying to engage me in conversation about something I'm unsure about. Maybe I see that person in the grocery store as a child of God. More often than not, we're giving in to the world because it's cuter, more annoying, or both. But what would happen if instead we stopped rendering to Caesar and started rendering to God? **AMEN!!!**