

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Sara B. Dorrien-Christians
Sunday, October 25, 2020

Matthew 22:15-22

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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And 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.” When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

In the past few days, I have delighted in my social media newsfeed. It is post after post of y’all posing with your “I Voted” stickers, usually naming the polling place and how long (or short) the line was, reminding us all to *make a plan and you can vote anywhere, when you vote early!* I have yet to cast my vote, but your encouragement is inspiring and I hope you will keep it coming.

I was in a meeting on Thursday and when we went around the virtual table to share where we’ve experienced *joy* recently, one of the participants named voting a real joy. And his testimony created a ripple effect in my mind — the first time I voted (with a parent showing me the way); the first time I voted and left with a lump in my throat, overcome with gratitude for *the right* to do it; the first time I stood in a line that was way too long, surrounded by people who had less time to give than I, but most of whom hung in there nevertheless.

In the past days and weeks, I’ve also heard a number of you describe the oddity of this election season. The shortage of yard signs is particularly glaring, as is the absence of the *series* of live debates between the candidates, with live audiences to participate in them. This seeming silence, of course, is juxtaposed with the feeling that this is actually one the tensest elections we as a country have ever experienced. Just yesterday I received a notification from an old friend in Atlanta whose husband works for the Carter Center as a Middle East conflict analyst. Alarmed by the similarities between what is brewing in the US, and the Middle Eastern conflicts he has worked on, he is directing a project that aims to mitigate violence around the US election...engaging networks of faith leaders and others to help reduce the risk of violence and encourage a peaceful transition of power, should it come time for transition.

All of this — our fear, our joy, our heightened sense of possibility in any direction — come with us this morning into our worship spaces — where we meet this story in scripture: *Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?*

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It sounds like a question about church and state—it sounds like an invitation to probe an interesting ethical question — remembering, of course, that an ancient Palestinian context is quite different than our modern one. They would have had zero notion of any separation between “church and state” — nor any language to even describe it.

But still, an interesting question about the kind of relationship the faithful should cultivate with the state they live in.

As it turns out, the Pharisees are not — in fact— so interested in having an interesting conversation about these things. They are motivated primarily by their own lust for power, and the infuriating way that this strange, presumptuous, table-turning and trouble-making rabbi has gathered a following. *By what authority do you do these things? By what authority do you speak for God? Certainly not ours!*

So they gang up with the Herodians, which is rather ironic because the Herodians were all about working with the Romans while the Pharisees were all about not working with the Romans.

Nevertheless, they gang up with the Herodians on this occasion because it is expedient, and they ask a simple, “either-or” type of question that betrays their motive.

They are only interested in trapping him.

If he says, “yes, it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor,” he will lose face with his disciples and the crowds that are still on his side. The tax the Pharisees refer to is a poll tax — an annual payment to the occupying Roman Empire that was massively unpopular amongst the subjugated Jewish people. If he answers, “yes, it is lawful,” he has lost the people.

And if he answers, “no,” well, that is grounds for being arrested and crucified.

The Pharisees think they’ve won. Either way, he answers, they’ve got ‘em.

But Jesus is clever. (Does that ever make your list of Christian virtues? Cleverness?)

His answer actually harkens back to a sermon he gave early on in his ministry — when he had to establish who he was as a leader and what he believed — which in those days demanded that he clarify how he thought the Jewish people should deal with the occupying foreign power. There was no shortage of opinions on the matter.

And so to answer that question he gives a series of examples that the people would have recognized. *If someone strikes your right cheek, offer the left as well. If you’re sued for your coat, give your cloak, too. If you’re forced to go a mile, go a second.*

Each of those examples points to an interaction not between peers but between a Jewish person and a person of some authority in Rome— a person who is exploiting the powerlessness of the Jew- and these were everyday examples. These humiliating things happened frequently.

Far from being the “doormat Christianity” that it’s often accused of — by Christians and non-Christians alike— the direction Jesus gives is clever, and it is empowering.

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- If you offer your left cheek to a Roman soldier, he can't slap you with the backhand slap that he would have used on your right cheek. Your turning of the cheek forces him to make a fist, which it turn signifies your equality to him. You're now a peer, worthy of true fistfight.

- If you offer your cloak in addition to your coat, you are now standing there butt-naked in a court of law, and the person witnessing your nakedness is just as shamed — if not more — than you are.

- If you insist on going the extra mile, more than the Roman soldier is allowed by law to force your labor—he is then forced to beg you for its return.

Walter Wink is a New Testament scholar that has spilled a lot of ink on this passage, so if you want to learn more I would commend his writing to you — but suffice it say for now —

The direction Jesus gives here might be called in our time a “creative, non-violent solution,” and it is as pragmatic as it is principled because Jesus loved these people. It was a “middle way” between fight and flight, and it's a way that's been embraced by countless people and movements in the last 100 years, especially, as they seek to assert their humanity and demand their rights in states that lord it over them.

Come full circle to this moment, as Jesus finds himself in Jerusalem and nearing the end of his ministry and his life —he responds to the tension of this moment in a similarly creative way — a way that reframes the issue, exposes those who seek to harm, and preserves life.

Instead of answering the question outright, he asks the Pharisees to produce the coin that's used to pay the tax. (It's the only coin one can use to pay that tax.)

They do, immediately, and when they produce it, Jesus asks, “Whose head is this? And whose title?”

The text moves on so quickly that it's easy to miss the significance here. This question is actually the “mic drop” moment, not what comes after it.

The Pharisees answer correctly, it's the emperor whose head is on the coin. Notice they don't finish the sentence. The title would have conferred the emperor's divinity, either naming him divine outright or as the son of god.

Any Jew carrying that coin with its engraved image and divine title would have been in violation of the Torah —breaking not just one but two commandments.

The coin was problematic for all Jews living at this time, because not having it got you into trouble with the Romans, and having it meant being in violation of the Torah.

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So when Jesus brings the coin into this exchange, he is exposing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees— in a way that silences them long enough for him to get away— but he’s always using the opportunity to make a bigger point for any who had ears to hear:

In whose likeness are *you* made? David Lose is one of the multiple biblical scholars who has pointed out that when Jesus asks, “Whose head is this? And whose title?” — those present would have recognized the ____ from Genesis. *In whose image are we made?* In God’s. In God’s image are we made.

Lose points out that Jesus never accuses the Pharisees “of blasphemy nor disloyalty; rather, he calls them hypocrites, those who have quite literally taken to wearing another, and false, likeness. They have forgotten who they are, in whose likeness they were made.”

It is the framework in which we hear that last direction and an answer to the question: Give to Caesar’s what is Caesar’s, and to God’s what is God’s.

This is not the support of Caesar, and of the empire that will crucify him very soon. It’s not the support of an unethical tax system that occupies a people and then makes them pay for it.

It is an acknowledgment that people of faith live in the world, and it is a transformation of that world order that we are called to seek— guided by the Spirit of the Living God. It is not a world we are called to flee from, seeking only “spiritual things.” For the Hebrew people, a good government was always part of the picture. The Book of Deuteronomy summarizes the law, laying out what a nation under God ought to look like — in all of its systems—especially political and economic. It talked about shared, or relational, power; about particular concern for the marginalized; about jubilee—with its cancelation of debt and freeze on interest and return of everyone to their ancestral property — all in the interest of rebalancing and assuring that wealth didn’t accumulate in the hands of a few for too long. (For a nation that espouses Judeo-Christian values so fervently, I keep waiting for a moderator to ask the candidates what they think about this!)

We’re told in 2nd Kings that King Josiah repented when he read the book of Deuteronomy because he realized how far the kingdom he led had departed from God’s vision. And of course, the prophets called the people back to that way, time and time again. They interpreted the subjugation of their land and their people as divine punishment for not living up to those ideals.

This was the tradition of Jesus. And Jesus invited us to live in the world creatively — reflecting the creative answers that he gave to hard questions.

To give to Caesar what is Caesar’s isn’t very much, in the end, for a people who know *to whom* they belong, a people who know in whose likeness they are made.

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And to give to God what is God's — well, *that's everything*.

If you give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's, you are giving God much, much, much more— *because everything belongs to God*.

For the living of these days, leading up to this election, what can we give God? What does it look like to give to God all of who we are and hope to be? What does it look like for *you*?

—Is it the reception of a grace that tames your hot anger?

—Is it space for an idea that doesn't fit with your world view but feels oddly faithful?

—Is it yielding to the truth that everything belongs to God — including—and perhaps especially— those things we would rather not give God?

Jesus — who loves us —

Jesus —who is clever —

Jesus — who showed us how to be *in the world but not of it*—

Invites us to receive the same truth that he reminded the Pharisees of:

We are God's. It is God's image in whom we are made.

It is a truth that is equally as challenging as it is comforting.

Thanks be God. Amen.