

Sunday, October 18, 2020

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Matthew 22:15-22

It's the Economy...

INTRODUCTION

A few weeks ago, we looked at chapter 21 in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus had made a spectacle entrance into Jerusalem by riding in on a donkey, surrounded by enthusiastic rabble rousers, undesirables, street people, sick people and many others considered "unclean". This wild parade was a cross between a civil action and a street theatre performance. Matthew tells us that Jesus and his followers made such a stir that it fired up the whole city. Then Jesus doubles down. He dismounts at the Holy Temple courtyard and immediately starts flipping over the tables, chasing out the money changers and street vendors.

The chief priests and temple authorities are outraged. They are seething. But this raggedy crew is massive and energized. Jesus and his followers essentially rode into Jerusalem and occupied the temple. The religious leaders were nervous and powerless, unless they could somehow expose Jesus as the fraud, they thought him to be.

The next day, the occupation continued. Tensions were high in the over-crowded temple. The authorities first tried to get Jesus on blasphemy charges, but Jesus skillfully turned the tables on them. In today's reading the leaders have returned with a new strategy to discredit Jesus and put an end to this scandalous embarrassment. They would send in Pharisees - the respected authorities in Jewish law. But this time they would also send in Herodians. Herodians were aligned with King Herod and the Roman empire. Pharisees and Herodians were generally enemies, but one thing they both agreed on is that Jesus was dangerous trouble for both religion and the empire, so, the enemy of my enemy becomes my friend. They would team up to publicly trap Jesus in a coordinated political, religious web. One group defended the empire while the other guarded the orthodoxy of the religion.

Listen to how it goes in this reading from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 22, verses 15 through 22...

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" ²¹ 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." ²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

SERMON

Dear Jesus, you came to reveal the fullness of God's love and found only resistance and malice. Instead of embrace you were ridiculed, demonized and slandered. Help us to hear the message you came to give and give us insight into how to respond to your Gospel today. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. AMEN

When I was a kid there was a really weird television show called, "Leave it to Beaver". *Beaver* was probably about the same age as I was at the time and his older brother Wally had a friend named Eddie Haskell. Eddie was a duplicitous, smart-mouthed trouble maker who would always shower the Beaver's mom, June Cleaver, with syrupy, insincere compliments. "That's a lovely dress you're wearing, Mrs. Cleaver." Then, as soon as June left the room, Eddie would punch poor little Beaver hard in the arm and manipulate Wally into some hairbrained scheme. Well, by the end of the half-hour Beaver and Wally would learn their lesson and the Cleaver's were one big happy family once again.

These religious and civil leaders who approached Jesus reminded me of first century Eddie Haskell's. They begin by playing the role of sycophant admirers of Jesus but then drop a question that is clearly designed to be a trap. It's kind of like that old chestnut, "Have you stopped beating your wife?" They fire the question like Mike Wallace on 60-minutes... "What do you think, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" If Jesus says it IS lawful to pay taxes to Rome, the admiring Jewish crowd very well might turn on him because they despise this Roman occupation and deeply resent the Roman tax. Alternatively, if Jesus says it is UNLAWFUL to pay taxes, he may very well be arrested by the Empire authorities. Here we see religion and politics conspire and collide. Those two always seem to cause trouble. But just like Ward Cleaver, coming home to settle domestic chaos, Jesus cleverly defuses the whole affair. First, he names his assailants for who they are, flat out calling them hypocrites, then he asks to see a Roman coin. Looking at it for a moment he then asks, "whose image is on this coin?" "The emperor's," they respond. "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

Oh! Check and mate! How awesome is that? I wish I could be that quick!

I think there is a lot we might learn from this brief encounter. We all know that we are living in a season of great political divides, racial unrest, uncertainty of all kinds and today we are 2 weeks away from a very tense election. It is impossible these days to avoid the daily assault of widespread, unapologetic hypocrisy among many of our

leaders. It sometimes feels like every question posed to the candidates or in senate hearings and every answer given is strategically rehearsed and specifically designed to entrap, confront, evade or somehow manipulate. So many public figures are behaving like school-yard bullies. So many religious leaders are also proving to be an embarrassment to the religion they claim to represent. Sometimes I am reluctant to identify myself as a Christian minister. The truth is that many unchurched people understandably think of Christians as judgmental, homophobic, hypocrites who only want to force their strict, narrow brand of morality on all the rest and use their influence and money in the political arena. Today, just as in Jesus day, politics and religion really are woven tightly together. We try to nuance and balance some kind of separation between church and state but that's simply a quaint notion. When I solemnize a wedding I have to say, "by the power invested in me by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts." Our church is a tax-exempt institution. High profile pastors enthusiastically endorse specific candidates. Believe me, politics and religion have always been wrapped in an uncomfortable embrace.

So, what are we to do as followers of Jesus, how might we navigate this minefield? What does Jesus teach us about our moral, ethical responsibility as a church? I know many of us get really uncomfortable taking a public stand on an issue that might cause friction or challenge our relationships and that is totally understandable. But still, I think we must also recognize the reality that to truly love our neighbor as ourselves, to truly care for creation, and stand against injustice is always going to be taking a political stance. To vote is to make a spiritually moral choice in the political arena. Each one of our votes expresses the kind of society we want to see. If we want to legislate for climate justice, we have to vote with that in mind. If we want to see systemic change for people of color, we have to vote that way. The same is true for GBLT&Q equal rights. The Gospel of my understanding points to a society that gives to the empire what is the empires for the common good of all, and gives to God the things that are Gods. The uncomfortable truth is that in God's economy, those who are suffering the worst come first. It seems to me that God's primary concern is for the ones who lack even the most basic needs to simply exist even one more day. Jesus clearly came to restore self-worth to anyone who had been stripped of their dignity or dehumanized and objectified as "the other". For him there is no division between the spiritual and financial, the political and religious. God really only cares about the condition of your soul and how you care for others.

Jesus shows us that in God's economy we can speak truth to power without being mean, smug, self-righteously indignant or judgmental. As a church, I truly believe that we are capable of standing up for justice without being partisan. In the end, Jesus tells us that we ultimately don't belong to the empire. Our true political identity is not aligned with the republican or democratic party. The truth is that every last one of us

belongs to God and we all bear the image of God. The politics of God is whatever politics work to wage peace, build bridges of connection, stand for what is just, forgive easily and walk humbly with our God and one another. The only currency in God's economy is love. To love as God wants us to love is where the true revolution will be found. To love as God loves has the power to change then entire world and bring healing to every nation nation. We just have to agree to do it!

But, be warned, the reason Jesus angered the powerful religious and civic leaders so much was because of his wide-open embrace for all people across every religious divide and political boundary. The healing and wholeness, forgiveness and unconditional love that Jesus offers all people threatens the powerful and disrupts the comfort and security of the wealthy.

If you take this Gospel seriously, you can't escape the fact that the Way of Jesus is risky and scandalous to the status quo in our society today even as it is liberation to the lowly, hope to the marginalized and redemption for the broken. To be the church, really be the church, we will inevitably offend people because the empire thrives on preserving power and sustaining oppression.

In flipping that coin back to his enemies, Jesus was not flipping them off, he was offering another way, a better way. He was seeking a connection with them on a deeper level. Maybe that's a good place for us to start. I imagine everyone of you knows and loves someone you completely disagree with in this politically charged partisan climate. Maybe we can reach out to these people - not to argue - but to just see how they are doing. Show them that even though you have deep disagreements politically you still care deeply for them. Kindness, connection and compassion are, always and forever the foundation of God's economy. Let us give to God what is God's. AMEN.