

10-18-26 sermon

Children's Sabbath

Matthew 22.15-22

We pick up Matthew's account of the life of Jesus where we left off last week. Having shown up the chief priests and the Sadducees, now the Pharisees turn their attention to this fellow teacher of the Law, who continues to stir things up. And the week of Passover is *not* the week to stir things up, *especially* in Jerusalem. Pilate has drafted in additional troops to keep the 'pax romana,' not least because – just a few years earlier – this guy called Judas had led an anti-tax revolt which was brutally suppressed, he and his followers crucified outside Jerusalem. Jerusalem was always a tinderbox during Passover. The smoldering resentment at the occupation of the Land promised to their ancestors by their pagan oppressors meant it only took a spark to set things off. The Roman governor, Pilate, was all too aware of that, as were the supporters of the family of Herod. A family who quite happily collaborated with empire as it increased their wealth, even as it kept the majority of their people in poverty. So, Matthew tells us, the Pharisees come to Jesus, plotting to entrap him. They're trying to set up a 'gotcha moment,' so beloved of politicians everywhere. Ask someone what sounds like a seemingly harmless question but which actually puts them in the corner, knowing whatever answer they give will either incriminate them, or pit them against their supporters. But as we have seen several times here recently, you had better think through that question carefully if you want to succeed in your 'gotcha' moment. For instance, make sure you know the difference between a professional sports team in Atlanta, and a college sports team in Iowa! The Pharisees believe they've got the perfect question to catch Jesus in a 'gotcha' moment. One which will elicit a response that will either disappoint his supporters or will allow the Pharisees to turn Jesus over to the Romans for sedition, "like that Judas fellow you crucified a few years' back." But having been embarrassed by Jesus on more than one occasion, rather than run the risk again, they send some of their *disciples* to ask the question, no doubt, lingering at the edge of the crowd to see what happens. The Herodians join the disciples, ready to arrest Jesus *for* sedition. They begin with what sounds like insincere flattery, but which may actually be a grudging respect. "Rabbi, we know that you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one..." probably glancing at the pharisees on the edge of the crowd, "...for *you* do not regard people with partiality." Probably glancing around at the crowds, who are hanging on Jesus' every word this week. And then comes the question that they think will provide the 'gotcha' moment: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

Mic drop. The pharisees lean in. The Herodians glance to the place where they have stationed the Temple Guard, ready to push their way through the crowd to arrest Jesus, and the crowd waits with bated breath, knowing the quandary Jesus faces. If he answers "no," well, in rush the Guard to arrest him for sedition. If he answers, "yes," then he just becomes like all the other leaders of the people, collaborating with Rome. Increasing their burden.

What will he say?

Jesus can also see through their thinly veiled malice, and names it. “Why are you putting me to the test...” turning to the Herodians, “you hypocrites? Show me the coin used *for* the tax.” And the disciples of the pharisees experience a wobble in their confidence, while Jesus waits for a coin. The disciples of the pharisees look around. None of them would carry such a coin into the Temple, so they probably looked to the Herodians. Even *they* probably wouldn’t carry a denarius into the Temple, but apparently at least one has, because, “they brought him a denarius.” Holding it out for him to see. Jesus wouldn’t have touched it, just asks his next question: “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered – probably barely audibly, “The emperor’s.” In fact, the coin would have been stamped with this inscription: “Tiberias Caesar, son of divine Augustus.” The other side said “Pontif. Maxim” – high priest, and had the image of Tiberias in profile. Much like British coins which bear the image of King Charles III, with the inscription, Fidei Defensor, “Defender of the Faith.” The main difference being that Charles does not believe he is divine, and certainly, the citizens of the realm do not! But in the first century Roman empire, the cult of the emperor is *the* most important religion, and the source of the main antagonism between the Jewish people and their oppressors. These coins were used to promote the worship of the emperor, and were avoided by the Jews, even though they had to pay the poll tax with them. No pharisee would touch such an unholy, idolatrous object, and *never* in the Temple. But apparently at least one Herodian has one in his possession, and now Jesus has forced them to speak the blasphemous inscription aloud, so they hear the blasphemy from their own lips. And Jesus may have been tempted to give his own mic drop! Jesus reverses the ‘gotcha’ moment – no doubt to the delight of the crowd. Then Jesus said, “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.” I imagine Matthew may have been tempted to embellish that description with, “...their tails firmly between their legs.”

And thus was born what is sometimes called the “two realms of power.” We have obligations to the state, and obligations to God. We are people of double allegiance – to God and to the state. This understanding has begun to show up with increased frequency recently, as we are firmly in election season. For instance, whenever the question arises regarding what our taxes should be used for, there’s a very large camp that rejects them being used as part of a social ‘safety net’ for those towards the bottom of the income and wealth scale. Perhaps you’ve heard this: “It’s not the job of the state to care for people. It’s the job of families, and if they can’t, churches should step in with charity.” This is the doctrine of the “two realms” writ large among us. “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” At face value, it would appear that Jesus *is* recommending that we learn to live with divided loyalties, and when there’s any conflict between them, then we should side with God. It’s a powerful idea, and it has taken deep root in this land. But the problem of loyalty to God and Caesar is not solved by the separation of church and state. That separation often results in legitimating the state to do what it wants while pushing the

church into the realm of private faith. Where we're often content to live, until the state infringes on that. But is that really what Jesus is doing with this famous declaration?

"Give Caesar his coins – pay your taxes – but give God your worship"? Certainly a great number of our fellow Americans believe that. I imagine some, if not many of us may believe that as well. But a closer reading of the Gospel of Matthew may lead us to a very different conclusion.

If we cast our minds back to chapter 6, and the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, quite plainly, you cannot serve God *and* wealth. You cannot serve *two* masters – there may be two realms of power, but you can only give your allegiance to *one* of them. Now he is saying something similar – even though it may not sound like it at first. "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." "Send those idolatrous coins back to Caesar, where they belong. You Herodians have already revealed your allegiance lies with the emperor, by daring to carry those blasphemous objects into the temple of the God of Israel. What about the rest of you – where does your allegiance lie?" You cannot serve both God *and* mammon – wealth. You cannot serve both God *and* Caesar. You can only pledge your allegiance one place – so choose wisely. Because, if you believe you can serve both God *and* Caesar, you may find yourself firmly on Caesar's side, even while believing you're on God's.

Where can we see this today? Especially *this* particular day, the Children's Sabbath. The Children's Sabbath was first observed in 1992, initiated by the Children's Defense Fund, an organization devoted to promoting child welfare, advocating for children living with poverty, and the protection of *all* children. The fact that such an organization exists reveals a lot about us as a society. We may believe that children are precious, and deserve a good start in life, having all they need not just to survive, but to thrive, yet every week in our kitchen, meals are prepared by Grace on the Go to feed food insecure children in our community. Snack bags are prepared for high school students so they have at least one meal after school that day. Once a month, we pack meals for Soups On Us – many of which are delivered to children. And this is a good thing. However, *charity* is not what children need. But charity is often seen as the solution, when you believe in the two realms. That doctrine can lead some people to sing "Jesus loves the little children" on Sunday, and then vote for a candidate on Tuesday who proposes to cut SNAP benefits. Or drop rural children from Medicaid. Or reduce their access to healthcare, even as the bodies in which they'll live their whole lives are developing. Many of our siblings in Christ who uphold the doctrine of two realms conclude that it's not the *government's* job to care for people, it's the church's. But the church clearly isn't up to the task. 1 in 4 children in our state live with food insecurity. In some rural counties, it's 1 in 3 children. Kentucky is in the bottom third of the 50 states when it comes to child well-being, while in the top half for church attendance. There are people of good faith all over this state working hard to feed hungry children, and yet 1 in 4 children in Kentucky are still food insecure. The danger of interpreting Jesus' words here in the Temple as meaning there are two distinct realms of power, *both* of which it is possible to

give our allegiance to, is that we can then separate our politics from our faith, even though we may claim our politics is informed *by* our faith.

We can pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” the kingdom that came with Jesus, one in which the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, the excluded are welcomed, and yes, where little children are placed in our midst as Jesus tells us we must become like them, and that when we welcome one of them, we welcome him! We can pray the prayer Jesus taught us, and then vote for people who actively work against all those things, and never think twice about doing so, much like the Herodians of Jesus’ time. Dom Hélder Câmara, a Catholic archbishop in northeast Brazil in the 70s and 80s once remarked:

“When I feed the poor, they call me a saint,
but when I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist.”

I think Dom Câmara understood what Jesus was saying to the Herodians.

You cannot serve God and Caesar. We have to choose to whom we will give our allegiance. And if we choose to give our allegiance to God, then sometimes we must confront Caesar, when Caesar fails to ensure that all those who live under his power have their basic needs met. Just as the prophets of Israel confronted the rulers of Israel when *they* failed to care for their people. Yes, we will continue to do what we can to provide food for the hungry, to serve the children in our communities in whatever way we can. *And* we must do whatever is within our power to do, to enable Caesar to better care for the people he is charged with serving. To elect those who are committed to the well-being of our children, and the common good of all. Those who propose *concrete* ways to care for the vulnerable members of society, rather than abstract economic concepts they believe will do so. Let us render unto God what is God’s – our worship and allegiance – and render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s – our taxes – and a commitment to doing what we can to ensure those taxes are used in ways that embody God’s will being done “on earth, as it is in heaven.”

May it be so.