

A Proper 24 2026
Saint Barnabas Church, Falmouth MA
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Matthew 22:15-22

I know. I know. I get it.

We have endured a week of contentious public discourse as we lurch toward midterm elections

After a day of social protest and witness, we come to in-person or online worship this morning in hope of eking out an hour of solace—perhaps some quiet prayer, uplifting music, and soothing kumbaya

Yet, gosh darn it, when we hear Matthew's Gospel, we experience tension upon tension as the Pharisees and Herodians plot to entrap Jesus in a double bind on taxes

Instead of kicking back with friends, Jesus must confront his sparring partners' malice before invoking spiritual jujitsu that leaves them stammering as they walk away

Instead of adding more stress this morning, how do we find glimmers of good news in today's scripture that empowers us to navigate the coming days of God knows what?

First, let's unpack the play-by-play in today's story before gleaning kernels of wisdom for our own lives

We have left behind several Sundays of quirky parables for a straight-up if strident conversation between Jesus and his adversaries

No one likes paying taxes, but the issue in today's exchange pours salt in the wound, since the annual tribute tax to Rome requires Jews to subsidize the foreign oppressor

The Pharisees and Herodians were strange bedfellows—the former despising Rome while the Herodians were in cahoots—but they coalesced to double-team Jesus

The trap was easy to see coming: if Jesus agrees that Jews should pay taxes to Caesar, he's capitulating to the oppressing Romans and renouncing Jewish nationalism, yet a negative answer encourages tax dodging and political sedition that sets up big trouble

Of course, Jesus sees the trap and refuses the bait

Since Jesus does not carry the traitor's coin, he asks them to produce a denarius—a poor man's day wage—inquires about the coin's icon (or image), drops his paradoxical bomb and sends them away stammering

Jesus's adversaries did not want a tax-planning seminar but sought a binary entrapment with a clear winner and loser—sound familiar?

Jesus gives no tax guidance, nor does he claim the tax's legitimacy

Jesus does not acknowledge Rome's authority or its reverse

But Jesus raises a big question that continues for you and me to this day: what truly belongs to God—holding our ultimate allegiance—and what belongs to temporal governance, especially in dark times when the government commits acts of injustice like unlawful incarceration or family separation?

This perennial question has a very textured 2000-year provenance in Christian discourse, getting wildly off track, for example, after Martin Luther's Two Kingdom teaching that Christian leadership is relegated to spiritual matters while paying concurrent obedience to the dominant and potentially corrupt secular authority—eventually enabling the rise of Nazism

We've done much better when embracing the ancient Jewish precept that God is Lord of all creation without lapsing into a spiritual/temporal false dichotomy

Fast-forward 2000 years from Jesus's tense encounter and 400 years from Luther's misinterpreted teaching: where does it leave us today?

How do we pay absolute allegiance to a God who loves us abundantly without doing it on the cheap in our stewardship, even as we take our rightful place in a temporal world that has necessary costs of doing business?

In the Venn Diagram of our lives, we celebrate a worldly presence while rejecting the false dichotomy of spiritual/temporal

We are not 19th century utopians who flee the complexity of society in the elusive search for a perfect world—a quest that rarely ends well

Like Jesus, we get our hands dirty amid the rampant bedlam of a broken world, doing so as imperfect embodiments of God's love

In Jesus's name, we celebrate that which is good while calling out injustice or false allegiance that denies God's reign

Like the Jesus who used spittle and prayer to bind up the wounded, we see God's hand at work in simple acts of justice-making and compassion as we walk humbly with our God

Like the disciples after feeding the 5,000, we're all for daily peace and quiet, even when there is more heavy lifting just around the next corner

Like Jesus, we should be smart enough to see those with malice coming our way, but we also should invoke paradox intervention instead of violence to fend them off, especially when rational discourse will not move the ball forward

Taking scripture's cue, we navigate a dystopian world as God's servants who are wise as serpents while being innocent as doves

As resurrection Christians, we invoke hope—not naivety, but hope—to sidestep the quicksand of hate and dystopian mush

My friends, we lurch from crisis to crisis in our public and political discourse, and we could spend neurotic hours attempting to predict the zigs and zags that will transpire in the coming weeks

In eight days, we will preview a film that critiques the false white gospel of white Christian nationalism

The gospel witness never depicts Jesus in a naïve or flummoxed state—and neither should we amid the tension of this season

Repeatedly, Jesus proclaims a Kingdom of God's righteousness—God's *basileia*—that breaks into this world and redeems it from its brokenness and pain

Before the heavy lifts of Jesus's earthly ministry—including its own crescendo in Holy Week—Jesus finds solitude for prayer and communion with God

Such prayer never implies an escapist trip to a spiritual day spa

Rather, it equips Jesus to focus more clearly upon his ministry of justice and reconciliation, keeping him agile in times of confrontation

As followers of Jesus, we are called to do no less

Like Jesus, we journey through a world that is simultaneously temporal and spiritual, navigating the day while searching for the redemptive and transcendent

Like Jesus, we get our hands dirty while proclaiming God's love and addressing the broken realities of the human condition

Like Jesus, we employ paradoxical engagement and peaceful witness over violence when confronting hostility or malice

In doing so, we reject the love of power and replace it with the power of love

In a speech by Archbishop of Canterbury Sarah Mullally that we read for today's Forum on Artificial Intelligence, she reminds us:

"God created human beings in his own image, with glory and honour. Each and every one of us, regardless of who we are or what we do. We carry inherent dignity and immeasurable value. This is not in spite of our weakness, vulnerabilities and limitations, but in many ways because of and through them. God made us to be relational beings, in need of [God] and in need of others, not sufficient on our own."

In this spirit, we embrace God's inbreaking power that brings more justice, more joy, more right relationship with God and neighbor, along with a radical demand for a re-evaluated life and a renewed creation

Like Jesus, we proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, even if it is not in hand

Like Jesus, we find God's peace even when the world looks most foreboding

We flourish in relationship that is so foundational to what it means to be human

Even when the arc of the moral universe looks wildly convoluted, we embody Christian hope, proclaim Good News to a disheveled world, and recommit to our daily witness that the arc truly bends toward justice right here and now, in the spirit of God's holy name