First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

10/22/23

Conflicted

Matthew 22:15-22-NRSV

**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 Caesar 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, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’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.

This week, I found myself struggling with how to preach today’s text. Honestly, this happens to me more often than not, and I think it’s important for me to acknowledge the fact that I wrestle with scripture as much as anyone. Yes, I’ve had training in how to interpret our sacred text, however I never want to be considered the ultimate authority on the Bible, because I’m acutely aware of my own limitations and short comings. And at the same time, I’m also acutely aware of the fact that you all have called me to interpret God’s word in a way that is meaningful to your own lives and our life together as a portion of the body of Christ.

So, I’m going to give this a shot and we’ll see if I’m able to make sense of the words that the writer of Matthew has presented us today.

First, let’s talk context. Matthew places this encounter between Jesus, the Pharisees and the Herodians in the Temple just a couple of days after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem on what we now refer to as Palm Sunday. Remember, that as soon as Jesus entered the Holy City, he went to the Temple and drove out the money changers and the folks who were selling all sorts of animals used in the ritual sacrifices essential to proper Temple worship. All of this commerce, by the way, was allowed by the Temple priests and the Pharisees because they received a cut of the profits. Now, I don’t know about you, but if I had been the beneficiary of those transactions, I probably would have been very angry about what Jesus had done.

Expanding on the back story, a bit, the Herodians were people, Jews and non-Jews alike, living in Israel who supported Herod’s puppet regime and the Roman occupation. There was no love lost between the Pharisees and the Herodians, as they had very different agendas. But the one and only thing these two factions could agree on was their hatred of Jesus. And this is where the writer of Matthew’s Gospel picks up the story.

These two highly influential and powerful groups put aside their differences and banded together to get rid of Jesus. They certainly had different reasons; for the Pharisees, the loss of income caused by Jesus’ actions at the Temple, was just the latest reason to despise Jesus; for the Herodians, the fear that Jesus would lead an uprising against the Roman occupation, especially after what they had witnessed just a few days before, must have been forefront in their minds. For both groups, it was time to hold their noses, come together, and get rid of this menace once and for all. So, they come to Jesus and ask a rather simple question. *“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”* As is often the case, either/or questions are basically designed as traps, and Jesus is quite aware of the dangers posed by this inquiry. If he said no, it’s not lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, then he would be branded a seditionist and the Roman government would arrest him. If he said yes, it’s lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, his followers would turn against him, brand him a collaborator. I imagine the representatives from the Pharisees and the Herodians were gloating a bit, as they must have thought that they had Jesus in a no-win situation. Jesus’ response of *“Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s,”* completely turns the tables on these hypocrites and they leave amazed or, as other translations put it, confounded.

Here’s where it can get tricky for us in the twenty-first century. That one phrase, *“Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s,”* has been interpreted in a variety of ways over the centuries, but the most common interpretation seems to infer that Jesus is calling for the separation of our spiritual life from our regular everyday life.

I don’t think that Jesus ever intended for us to separate the various aspect of our lives into neat little boxes. I don’t think it’s as simple as making two columns on a sheet of paper and entitling one side “God” and the other side “Emperor,” and going about making lists of God stuff and Empire stuff.

Father Mike Marsh, an Episcopal priest serving as the Rector of St. Phillip’s Church in Uvalde Texas, writes this in his blog, “Interrupting the Silence,” *“To the degree we live with either/or, dualistic, thinking we only entrap ourselves. We too often fragment and compartmentalize our lives. So, we have our prayer life, our religious life, our family life, our political life, our love life, our work life, our economic life. We talk and live as if there is no integrity or coherence between them. When we do, we end up excluding God from a large part of our lives and our world. We perpetuate the Pharisaic-Herodian plot to entrap Jesus and we rightfully deserve to be called hypocrites.”*

Father Mike goes on to write, *“I don’t think Jesus is segmenting our lives or our world. He is not asking us to divide our loyalties or compartmentalize our lives. Instead he is holding before us the reality of God and the reality of our emperors. Both are real. Both are a part of our lives and our world. Jesus is asking us to step into and live in the tension of those two realities. That’s what he did. That’s where he lived. To stand in that place is to stand with Jesus. That’s where life gets real. That’s where life is really lived. It is neither a comfortable nor an easy place to be. There are no easy answers.”* So how do we live in the tension between these two realities which often conflict with one another? As Father Mike puts it, there are no easy answers.

Here are some questions for you: What do we gain by segmenting our lives? What is the benefit of compartmentalizing our prayer life, our religious life, our family life, our political life, our love life, our work life, or our economic life? What advantage do we have when there’s no cohesion in our day to day existence? Is God served when our lives lack integrity?

Continuing to live lives that are fragmented segmented, and compartmentalized, means that we are not living lives of integrity. If we lack integrity, in our own lives; if we are unwilling to live lives of cohesion, how can we expect others to hear and respond when we proclaim the good news of the Gospel?

I believe Jesus’ answer to the either/or question posed to him by the Pharisees and the Herodians was “yes God *and* yes Emperor.” I believe Jesus is holding us to the reality of God and the reality of Empire, and calling us to stand with him in the tension of both of those realities. That’s what he did. That’s where he lived*.*

It is only when we stop separating our prayer life, our religious life, our family life, our political life, our love life, our work life, and our economic life; it is only when we can live lives of integrity; lives of cohesion which are unfragmented and whole; it’s only then that we will be able to fully answer Jesus’ call to stand with him in the tension of the realities of both God and Empire and do the necessary work to bring about the Kingdom here on earth. AMEN