

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 45: 1-7
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 22: 15-22
October 18, 2020

“A Political Trap”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

We all try very hard to separate politics and religion, but everywhere he went Jesus found himself right smack in the middle of 1st century politics. I’m reminded of the maybe apocryphal story from back in the days of the troubles in Northern Ireland. A man was walking down the street when he found himself surrounded by an angry mob. The group demanded to know if he was Catholic or Protestant. Of course, the man had no idea what the affiliation of his attackers was, so he reckoned he had a 50% chance of being beaten within an inch of his life. Thinking quickly he answered, “I’m an atheist.”

“Ahh,” they said, “that’s fine. But tell us, which God would you not be believing in?”

Jesus had already come up against the Sadducees who were the chief priests and elders. Today we find him accosted by the Pharisees, who amazingly on this occasion, were working with the Herodians! The Herodians were supporters of Herod and his alliance with Rome, something the Pharisees strongly objected to. These were strange bedfellows. This would be like Mitch McConnell and AOC working together. You just can’t picture it happening. But in this case the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and both groups viewed Jesus as the enemy. The Pharisees had very carefully strategized the best way to attack Jesus, and once they had come up with a plan, they sent the younger less important members of the group along with the Herodians. That way anything that backfired would not backfire on the leaders. They must have thought that their strategy was flawless.

The young Pharisees sent to Jesus began with flattery. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”

How slimy! They seem deferential, but they don’t mean a word of it. This is pure manipulation. Jesus wasn’t fooled but there’s a good chance some of the crowd were. They phrased their question with such fake sincerity. The tax they referred to was the poll tax initiated when Judea became a Roman Province. This was basically a tax on being alive. You didn’t have to earn anything, or buy anything, or own anything. It wasn’t a tax on wages or sales or property. Existence was the only requirement. And as taxes go, it was hugely resented. The amount of the tax was one denarius, about a day’s wages for a worker. The fact that it had to be paid in this coin caused an additional problem for the scrupulous, because the denarius coin bore the image of

Caesar and the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, August son of the divine Augustus, high priest." Jews consider graven images idolatrous and the inscription itself was blasphemous. But the denarius was in common use. Only the zealots shunned it, preferring to carry around a lot of copper coins instead.

The Pharisees asked Jesus "Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" but the word we have as "pay" really meant "give", as if this were an option. It was NEVER an option. Has the IRS ever told you paying taxes was an option? All of the people around Jesus hated the tax and believed they should not have to pay it. They paid because they were forced to. If Jesus said, yes, you should pay it, he might alienate these followers. BUT if Jesus said "don't pay it" then the Romans could arrest him for sedition. The Herodians would report it immediately. Either way the Pharisees decided, Jesus loses. But Jesus was having none of it.

"You hypocrites," Jesus said, "why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax."

They brought him a denarius. This act alone proves that they were not overly zealous for God, because they possessed this coin while in the Temple courts. Jesus, apparently, had no money.

Jesus took the coin, turned it over in his hand and asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

They were speechless. Jesus just walked right through a foolproof trap. They should have had him and then they didn't.

Jesus' response stopped the Pharisees in their tracks, but what did he mean? In Jewish thought God is completely sovereign. A foreign power would have no control to impose taxes had God not allowed it. So, Jesus was not dividing the world in half saying this half of your life is secular and this half belongs to God. It all belongs to God. We may have to divide our budget. We will have to pay our taxes. But we should never divide our allegiance.

There is a lot of political anxiety and financial anxiety going around right now. I am no different than you. It's property tax time in my township! And I have to pay these taxes whether I like the people in office or not. It's not a choice. But I *still* experience that rising anxiety that we all know so well and I *still* have to remind myself that all of my money belongs to God, and God will work things out so there is enough to meet my needs. God always has.

As far as politics is concerned, the Northern Ireland situation is beginning to feel really current, only the question is are you a Republican or Democrat! It's no good saying "Independent," because they'll still nail you on that. Just as the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus deliberately, there are traps everywhere in our current environment. You're either for or against. It's black and white. And as soon as we choose a side we alienate 50%. But Jesus did not choose a side. Jesus rejected polarization as a way of life. He could see the many shades of grey in circumstances and people. Things are never as clear-cut as the sound bites we have hurled at us non-stop right now on television. The barrage of advertising leaves us not knowing what is true and what is

false. The psalmist says it more eloquently than any of us could: “Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; their heart is filled with malice. Their throat is an open grave; with their tongues they tell lies.” This is NOT how God wants us to live and how God wants us to treat one another.

Jesus produced a thoughtful answer, one that side-stepped the either/or options. I believe that part of our calling at this stressful time is to do the same. We need to be thoughtful and not reactive, to hear what is really being said behind the words. A lot of what is driving our nation today is fear. We are afraid because there is a deadly virus among us. We are afraid because unemployment is skyrocketing and people are slipping into poverty. We are afraid because businesses are losing the battle to survive. We are afraid because Thanksgiving dinner this year will be a small and limited gathering. And we’re afraid because the racial struggles and divisions of our nation that have long simmered under the surface have erupted in full and very public view. We are afraid that we might learn things we don’t like about ourselves or our nation.

Combative words are not the answer to fear. We might have combative words hurled at us, but we have to see what is really going on, and answer the fear, not the words. People need reassurance, calm and love.

Jesus found a way out of the political trap that had been laid for him. We can too. If we ask God for the right way to respond and for understanding God will give it to us. This is a time to be peacemakers, a time for wisdom, a time for God’s grace. The only side we have to choose, is God’s. Amen.

Psalm 5

- ¹ Listen to my words, Lord,
consider my lament.
- ² Hear my cry for help,
my King and my God,
for to you I pray.
- ³ In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice;
in the morning I lay my requests before you
and wait expectantly.
- ⁴ For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness;
with you, evil people are not welcome.
- ⁵ The arrogant cannot stand
in your presence.
You hate all who do wrong;
- ⁶ you destroy those who tell lies.
The bloodthirsty and deceitful
you, Lord, detest.
- ⁷ But I, by your great love,
can come into your house;

in reverence I bow down
toward your holy temple.

⁸ Lead me, Lord, in your righteousness
because of my enemies—
make your way straight before me.

⁹ Not a word from their mouth can be trusted;
their heart is filled with malice.

Their throat is an open grave;
with their tongues they tell lies.

¹⁰ Declare them guilty, O God!
Let their intrigues be their downfall.

Banish them for their many sins,
for they have rebelled against you.

¹¹ But let all who take refuge in you be glad;
let them ever sing for joy.

Spread your protection over them,
that those who love your name may rejoice in you.

¹² Surely, Lord, you bless the righteous;
you surround them with your favor as with a shield.

Matthew 22: 15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. ¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. ¹⁷ Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”

¹⁸ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, ²⁰ and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

²¹ “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.”

²² When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.