

It's a Trap!

Matthew 22:15-22

Slide: Politics

Politics. Just mentioning that word probably brings with it a reaction, right? Just the fact that I even say the word politics out loud may conjure up some discomfort. It does for me. How does your body feel right now when I say that word – POLITICS? Do you go to a particular queasy place in your stomach? Do your palms sweat. Are you excited that I might say something political or afraid? Right now, in our culture, I'm hearing over and over and over again how people are making things political. What do you think that means? What does being political mean? Is it our behavior towards a certain subject? Is it our view of someone else on that subject? What does it mean to be political today? And what does faith have to do with it?

I don't know about you, but when first hearing the Gospel for today, politics is the first place that I found my brain went to. I automatically go to politics when I hear this reading.

Oh, no! You may be thinking right now, "The pastor is talking politics in her homily! She's getting political. The nightmare has come true!" But, hey, let's just remember that talk of politics wasn't something that I started this morning. The Gospel reading from Matthew, the appointed text for this very Sunday, already went there for us. I'm talking about the topic of...Taxes! Yes, taxes. The thing that is certain in life along with death, taxes. And the question being asked Jesus is a trick question. As the famous Star Wars quote goes: "It's a trap!"; and it's meant to get Jesus to take a particular *political* side and to reveal whose side he is on. Their question, too, is intended to trap him. Here is the question: "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the Roman emperor or not?" Said another way, they are essentially asking Jesus, "Are you for Rome or are you against Rome?"

Sadly, as much as we hope and wish as Americans that the life of Jesus didn't include the life of the political realm, it did. We just might not like that. Especially Lutherans don't like that for some reason, which is theologically problematic because sometimes Christians need to talk about what is political and to discuss how to resolve problems together in both the civic realm and the religious one. Luther never meant for Christians to remain neutral to conversations on politics, nor that we are not to have these hard conversations about our civic life together. Jesus most certainly did not.

And despite what we might want the Bible to be for our own comfort, unfortunately for us, the Bible is really a very political book. There is a lot in it that challenges us, everything from ambiguity to cultural norms that don't match ours, to understanding context. That's why studying the Bible is really valuable. I invite you to my introduction to Mark's Gospel at Adult Ed the first couple weeks of November, just to get a jump on our Advent season coming up. That's a side note to the sermon today. And, you don't need to know anything about the Bible to come to that study.

But, just read some of the prophetic books like Amos or Isaiah or read the book of Kings. Try reading the book of Romans, chapter 12 or the book of Revelation, which is a letter sent to the seven churches about how to be subversive to the government, which at that time was Rome! These prophets and followers of Jesus sometimes had hard things to say to their leaders, kings, and country...and they were people who had the hard task, sent by God, to keep their Kings and their people accountable, not only to God, but to all they encountered. Uncomfortable yet? I know I am!

Slide: Faith/Politics

And, just as it is for us, politics were all around Jesus. Even his death was political. For, the religious authorities of the day were also steeped in the political culture and climate. They had to either work for Rome or against it. And, even if they hated Rome, those religious groups would often make deals with Rome to advocate for themselves.

In today's reading, we have two of those groups. Why not see where Jesus took sides? Then, he could be pinned, labeled, and revealed to be against the very groups that are asking him this difficult question from Matthew.

Let's look at the two groups who come to try to trap Jesus in the Gospel reading for today. These two groups are the Herodians and the Pharisees both religious groups. Actually, these two groups never got on. They hated each other so that ought to say something if they both want to trap Jesus. The very idea that they get together to get Jesus to make a mistake says something about their desire for Jesus to be dead. So, here they are two religious and very political groups together trying to trap Jesus into saying something.

On one hand the Herodians who follow the kingship of Herod, are religious Jews who are on the side of Rome. They feel that taxes ought to be paid to Rome so that Rome may continue to support King Herod as the rightful King of the Jews. So, it's only natural that the Herodians support Rome, so that the Jewish state can survive.

But then there are the Pharisees, the religious group who believe that Rome is an oppressive power over them. They do not want to pay taxes to Rome because the emperor of Rome proclaims to be a god, a god that demands worship. And the Pharisees find it idolatrous to worship anyone but God alone. However, they are also hypocrites since they use Rome when it benefits them to do so politically; that is, if it advances their religious cause, which it often does. Furthermore, the Pharisees were mostly endured by Rome because they continued to pay taxes to Rome. So, there's a little bit of playing on both sides here.

Both groups are religious groups and both groups are mired in the politics of the day. So, when they come to Jesus, Jesus sees them as exactly what they are: Neither group cares about the deep faith that Jesus calls them to. They care more about their own agendas and achieving their own religious and political goals.

Now, if Jesus should say, “You ought to pay taxes,” then the Herodians would consider him a patriot to Rome while the Pharisees would be able to trap him as one who was not faithful to God. However, if Jesus had said, “No, you should not pay taxes to the emperor,” than the Herodians would have considered him guilty of treason against the state of Rome. To disagree with the emperor meant that you were not a patriot. So, you see this is a pretty good trap. There seems to be no good answer either way.

So, now we know the background of what Jesus experiences here by these two authorities. And Jesus does not enter the political fray. But he is not neutral either. Instead, he tells it how it is from God’s perspective. He simply tells us what belongs to the emperor and what belongs to God. But what is that, you might ask? What *does* belong to the emperor and what *does* belong to God?

Slide: Tiberius Coin

Notice that Jesus asks for a coin, the coin that would have been used for taxes of that day. On a side note, you might also notice that Jesus has to ask for the coin, as it seems like he does not have any of his own. So, they give him the coin and he holds it up. Jesus asks, “Whose image is this on the coin?” They reply, “The emperor’s.” “Then, give to the emperor what is the emperor’s and to God what is God’s.”

Now, what makes them go away amazed is not his answer about what is the emperor’s, nor is it that he managed to squeeze his way out of the question, but they are amazed by what Jesus says about what belongs to God. For, the coin shows the image of the emperor only on the surface of the coin. But the image of God – where is the image of God shown? The image of God is deep within us. It is imprinted upon us, living flesh. At the very beginning of creation, God created us in God’s image. We see this in chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis. That means that everything with God’s image imprinted on it belongs to God. And that knowledge changes how we view what belongs to the emperor.

If the truth were to be told, I don't think that Jesus was answering the political question those two parties wanted him to answer. But I think that he was telling them that they were asking the wrong question and having the wrong focus. The real question, Jesus seems to say, is not: "What makes a true patriot – one who pays taxes to the emperor or not?" The real question is: "What does it mean to be a follower of the God whose image is imprinted upon you, especially since that image belongs to God?"

Slide: Baptism of Madeline

If we are imprinted with God's image, and if we are marked with Christ's cross on our foreheads at our baptism, then we have been marked as God's own since the dawn of creation. Knowing all that, all that we are and all that we have belongs to the one in whose image is bestowed upon us, that changes everything about how we respond as beloved ones to God in a hurting world. Jesus says that that should be what helps us make decisions not only with what we do with what God gave us, but in the political and civic realm as well.

So, when we vote this season, dear friends, or when we purport to take a political side of something, remember that we ought to do this as the image of the one who created us. Not only that, but we are also to look at the other who differs from us as the image, the *Imago Dei*, Image of God as well. Consider that image God loves along with the image of those others that God loves, so that whether we are paying taxes or giving of ourselves for the civic good of others and the world, we do so out of our desire to follow the one who could have taken his political place in the world if he wanted to but chose instead the path of a cross. For, to give up one's right to power because of love for the whole world instead, that is possibly the biggest political message of all. Amen.