

September 25, 2016

TEXT: Matthew 22:15–22

TITLE: Political Choices in the Light of Day

Part of the problem with preaching about politics is the word itself: Politics. Politics. It's a word with three explosive consonants in it—an explosive initial “p”, a hard “t”, and then that complicated “cs” sound at the end. Politics. It's almost impossible to say the word while smiling. (Try it at home later.) Meanwhile, faith is a lovely word. Gently aspirated consonants at the beginning and the end, wrapped around a long vowel. The word lends itself to being elongated from the pulpit, like a warm blanket on a cold night—faith—while politics is like a teacher clapping hands to get your attention—politics. Both words deal with our relationships to others here on earth, although faith defines relationships more broadly, including God and all of creation in the equation. Yet here's the big difference between faith and politics—and my thesis for this morning: **Faith has a depth we keep avoiding, yet which can free us, while politics has a shallowness we keep seeking, even though it enslaves us.** And the way to talk about this all starts with a coin, a hand, and a question.

Long ago, a group of men wanted to start a conversation with Jesus. They began with words of flattery. “Rabbi—you are sincere. You teach what is true. You aren't swayed by partiality.” Those statements were all accurate. Jesus was a person of sincerity, a teacher who spoke without deceit or pretense, whose words were trustworthy and honest. He wasn't one to show partiality; rather he went out of his way to include the outcasts, lift up and heal the people on the margins. So the opening comments in this dialogue were true on all counts. But the question that followed was untrue on all counts. It was asked insincerely; it did not reflect the truth of God's ways; and it was done out of partiality toward Jesus' enemies and those who would harm him.

They asked, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” This imperial tax was particularly loathsome because it supported the very Roman powers that kept the people in oppression. If Jesus says “Yes” to paying this tax, he sides with the rich and powerful against the poor people of the land. If Jesus says “No” to paying this tax, he is guilty of political rabble-rousing and could be arrested for insurrection. The verbal trap was impressive in its simplicity. All of life reduced to a two-part question—Yes or No; heads or tails, like the two sides of a coin.

Since the men had already acknowledged Jesus to be an honest teacher, Jesus first responds with a hard truth: “You are hypocrites. Why do you put me to the test?” But rather than play their game of false choices, Jesus asks to see a coin and asks whose name is on it. Then from the narrow simplicity of “Yes/No” politics, Jesus pulls the conversation into the larger depth and complexity of faith, saying “Give to Caesar that which is Caesar's, but give to God the things that are God's.” Politics has a shallowness that enslaves; faith has a depth that can free us.

What actually belongs to Caesar? Well, there are legitimate things owed to any government. We look to them for general safety, for roads and water and infrastructure that supports our lives together. Paying for these things requires taxes, although no one ever pays taxes joyfully or with complete honesty. It is only the threat of Caesar or the IRS that prides the coins from our hands, even if we recognize it is our duty to pay what is owed. So conversely what belongs to God? Here we move from fussing over taxes to naming a broader, deeper reality about life itself. *Psalm 24: The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it.* God is the source of life; Christ is the Savior and Redeemer of all; the Holy Spirit renews us with every breath we take. There is no formula for defining what we owe God—no simple tax document to calculate our debt to the Lord. Politics and earthly power close in on us, harden us into people of simple choices: Pay this, Pay that; Yes or No, In or Out, Us vs. Them. Faith and God's love open us up, move us out into a world generously given to us, full of complexity and wonder that challenges us, yes, but ultimately sets us free for love, justice and peace.

Let's explore another example of simplistic politics vs. deep and life-giving faith. Marilynne Robinson in one of her recent essays made this powerful statement: We do not know what we obliterate when we drop a bomb.¹ Some may argue that we do know what we obliterate when we drop a bomb—we can survey the damage with cameras afterwards, or investigate the scene with ground troops. But that is the narrow, simplistic language of political self-interest. A bomb destroys people, who today we call an enemy but tomorrow could legitimately be friends. A bomb destroys buildings that may house soldiers or could house a hospital. Bombs often miss their targets. Politics calls this "collateral damage"; faith names them "innocent children of God." Bombs rain from the sky, provoking others to buy their own bombs, inciting others no longer to trust the ways of peace, allowing others to profit from the industry of death instead of investing in preserving life. Caesar's shallow logic of bombs and violence enslaves us. We must disenthral ourselves, to use the famous phrase from Abraham Lincoln. We must step back and see our actions through the deeper, saving perspective of faith in God.

Here's another example that, I'm sorry to say, is a hard story to tell. In 2007, a war tribunal heard accounts from witnesses of the 1995 Bosnian massacre of up to 8,000 Muslim men and boys in Srebrenica. One witness was a truck driver, delivering food to the executioners who simply lined up their victims and sprayed them with gunfire. At one point during the massacre, the shooting suddenly stopped. A small boy crawled out from the tangle of bodies, covered in blood, crying for his father. The soldiers lowered their weapons. The commanding officer ordered them to shoot the boy, but they refused, telling him to do it himself. The truck driver described going forward and the boy took him by the hand. The driver testified: "I don't want any one of you to experience that, the grip of that boy on my hand. I was amazed at his strength." The man put the boy in his truck. He too would live to testify about the horrible massacre that day. For

sadly, after he was taken from the scene, the gunmen simply returned to their grim work.²

The simplicity of narrow politics enslaves us. Pay Caesar or don't pay Caesar. Fight a war or not. Shoot an enemy or not. Pick sides. Demonize the other. Protect your self-interests. Are you Christian or Muslim? Republican or Democrat? Red state or Blue state? Black or White? Police officer or Police shooting victim? Yes or No? The simple answer in Bosnia was "shoot or don't shoot." The more complex answer involved a boy, an extended arm, and a grip that had a strength and life in it more powerful than any weapon of war.

Long ago another arm was extended, holding a coin with the emperor's face upon it. Jesus said, "Yes, render to Caesar what is Caesar's but give to God what is God's." With that faithful answer, the focus expanded out from the coin to the hand that held the coin, to the men standing before Jesus, to the crowds listening nearby, to the villages and capitals of Jerusalem and Rome and on to the ends of the earth. *For the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it.* Sometimes we have to choose between one option and another. But many times we need to be freed from the narrow choices themselves—the limited options the world sets before us. It's never just about coins or guns or race or political allegiances or national identities. Faith breaks apart these false choices and by grace frees us to look at the world with the eyes of Christ—to see that deep, complex, faithful place where we remember that our first priority is to love God with all our heart, mind and soul and love our neighbor as ourselves. Period. When we start there, suddenly we can breathe again. We can move again. We can live again.

We seek the shallow simplicity of politics, even though it enslaves us; yet once we step into the grace, depth and complexity of faith, we are set free at last. Marilynne Robinson, who made the earlier comment about bombs, is a big fan of John Calvin. She once quoted this wonderful passage from Calvin's commentary on the gospels: *The whole world is preserved, and every part of it keeps it place, by the will and decree of God, whose power, above and below, is everywhere diffused. Though we live on bread, we must not ascribe the support of life to the power of bread, but to the secret kindness by which God imparts to bread the quality of nourishing our bodies.*³ It is never just the coin we should focus on. Rather we are to look at the hand that holds the coin, the arm that extends it, the human being presenting it, the hopes and fears that motivate it, the community that surrounds it, and the foundation of love and peace that is all part of God's providential care for this world. Then we see rightly—and then we can choose rightly.

One final image for you today: Politics and narrow, divisive choices thrive in places of darkness and shadow. If you are going to ponder questions of faith, do it at the dawn of a new day. You see things differently in the morning light than you do in the shadows of evening. There's a reason why God's deepest truth was revealed in the light of an early Easter morning. For on that day, there was

no two-sided coin to entrap but rather an empty tomb to set us free. There was no arm extended in distrust, but a hand miraculously alive and welcoming despite being scarred with the marks of crucifixion. And in place of an insincere trick question came an answer of faith for all people. The one who was dead is now alive. God is Lord over life and death. By the light of that clear blue Easter morning, we were given our answer. In all things, look to God and give to the Lord that which is the Lord's, and you will find peace. AMEN.

¹ Marilynne Robinson, The Givenness of Things, 2015, p. 119.

² "Justice of the Peace", memoir of Carla Del Ponte Madame Prosecutor, New York Times Book Review, March 29, 2009, p. 22.

³ Robinson, The Givenness of Things, p. 263.