

## “How to Heal the World”

(Pr 24) 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – October 18, 2020 – Matthew 22.15-22/A

Matthew 22:15-22: Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

When telling a story, details are important. Especially if we never lived in 1<sup>st</sup> century Judea, there are some tidbits of information that will help orient us in a story we know, but in a culture, location and political atmosphere with which we are not so familiar. Today we join Jesus in his final days, entering the story as the conflict between Jesus and Jerusalem’s religious establishment is heating up. Even though he has entered The Holy City to massive popular acclaim on Palm Sunday, the storm clouds of change are gathering around the Temple, his disciples, and Jesus himself. This is the final act that will have as its end, a world turned upside down, life choices, and the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of the world God so loves. But for you to be able to put yourselves into this story right here, you’ll need to know three things about what’s going on:

#1. Who were the **Herodians**? These were followers of Herod Antipas, the Herod who had been so intrigued and troubled by John the Baptist, and had ended up killing him. Son of Herod the Great who was so frightened by the news of Jesus’ birth, the Herodian family kept an unholy alliance with the Roman occupiers, who were allowing him to remain in power. On the other hand, the Pharisees were trying to keep Judaism distinct – separate from Rome – so their disciples would not have agreed on much with the Herodians. But politics, and the manipulation of power and authority, often breeds strange bedfellows.

#2. **Taxation** was the hot-button political issue of the day – especially the “head tax,” prepared for back when Jesus was in the womb - when “all the world” went home to be registered – counted, for the purposes of assessing the level of taxes to be paid. The stakes here were extremely high...for if there were protests or riots, or if there was no money from the taxation of the Jews, Rome’s point-man, Pontius Pilate, would lose his job. And if Pilate lost his job, Herod would lose his. And if Herod lost his job, the religious leaders would no longer have authority in Jerusalem...and the Romans would remove any hint of religious freedom. So, trapping Jesus between Rome and God would remove both of the threats this Jesus represented.

#3. **The Coin in Question** was a denarius, a Roman coin used to pay a day’s wage. Now, most of Jesus followers were day laborers, who existed day to day on this wage, with nothing left over; no more to give. Thus, the head tax set them behind a whole day’s wage, each time it was levied. The denarius was a symbol of Rome’s authority – of Judea’s obligation and obedience to the Empire. As such, pious Jews would have avoided even carrying one...not only because it bore the image of Caesar, but also for the imperial title he bore: *Son of God*. Having this coin in your possession was tantamount to idolatry - breaking two laws of Torah: to have no other Gods, and not to make a graven image. (So it’s rather ironic how easily such a coin was produced for Jesus’ inspection, for in the Temple, even their money should not be “unclean.”)

Jesus always has a way of helping us see things differently. Just as this Roman coin should have been changed into Jewish shekels by the moneychangers *outside* the Temple, in order to be used as an offering *inside* the Temple - these hard-hearted prosecutors of Jesus were about to see things through Jesus’ eyes. He knew how to use a rabbinic trick of answering in an unexpected way that changed the perspective. Think of all the times Jesus didn’t answer the question at all, or, answered a question with yet another question.

He had just finished teaching three parables which all revolved around new questions: In the Parable of the Two Sons, Jesus asked, **Who did the will of the Father?** And, surprise! It was NOT the one who responded that he would go and work, but the one who refused the father’s request but changed his mind! In the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, Jesus asked, **What will the owner do to the tenants, when he comes?** Surprise! He will **not** cut them down like wheat, but he will lay down the life of his son for them. Finally, in the Parable of the Great Banquet, **Who are God’s favorites, who will receive the invitation to the Wedding Banquet of the Son?** Surprise! Not the Chosen Ones who spurn the invitation, but those who come with eager, and open hearts!

So, **Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?** Does God really care about *silver or gold*? Nope. *About Status and Power*? Nope. *About Wealth and Trappings*? Nope. So, what DOES God care about? That we love the Lord our God with all our hearts and minds and strength, and we love our neighbor as ourself. That we listen to and pray for our enemies. That we speak up for and provide for the least of these. That we study our own race and work for Justice for every human. That we bring healing to places that have been bleeding for far too long. That we are involved in doing God’s Work with Our Hands, wherever and however we live.

Today is the Feast Day of St. Luke, the Evangelist. Luke was a physician, and his name is on the two- volume version of Jesus’ story as it is told in The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. That effort was made and spent to heal the world. This is a time of deep division in our country and in our world. A virus is ravaging nations for the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> time, and leaders are being called to account. Our own beloved United States is far from united as we begin voting in our presidential election. And our tired, beaten up country and world are sorely in need of some peace, some healing, some end to the violence of **our** passions and **our** political positions.

We yearn for healing, sometimes without even knowing it – and find that when we come to Jesus for whatever reason, sometimes Jesus just blows us all away with the power to choose. As my friend Ray Pickett asks of us, *What does the world need from the church and its members?*

Friends, we are being prepared for tasks we cannot even imagine right now, just as Jesus' disciples were being prepared for a life they could not imagine. Within the week they would be looking in the face of death. And three days later, the face of Resurrection. Perhaps we too, are being prepared to be witnesses and preachers and bringers of healing and hope.

To quote Native American Elder Stephen Charleston...*how will we find reconciliation in our national family? After so much anger, so much denial, so much misinformation, how will we find our way back to unity in diversity? How will we re-learn how to live together? It may seem too soon to ask these questions. We are still in the heat of the moment...But one day this fight will be finished... **As people of faith it will be up to us to help answer the questions...This process of reconciliation will need to be lived out one day if we are going to heal and become something new. It will not be easy. The wounds are deep.***

I believe that God is calling us in this moment. I believe that it is time for us to start thinking now about how we will witness - not only with our participation in this world through all its failures and victories – but also as we work for the Kingdom of God, which is breaking into hearts every hour of every day. Followers of Jesus, Our Risen Christ has given us this mission – to be *“in the world but not of the world.”* So, we give to this world what belongs here – tax in the coin of the realm – and we give our hearts, and our very lives to the One to whom they belong, the One in which we find our healing and our rest. Amen.

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**Resources:** Ruth Hamilton/Day 1; David Lose, *In the Meantime*; Sermon Brainwave; Robert Farrar Capon, *Parables of Judgment*; Steven Charleston Facebook Devotion 10/13/20; Susan Langhauser, *More Precious Than Gold*, Oct 19, 2014.