

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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October 18, 2020

In our text today, we see that political debates haven't changed much. Taxes have long been a hot button issue and seemingly innocent questions hold hidden agendas.

Today, we find Jesus not on a debate stage, but he does find himself in a type of debate with two groups of religious leaders. The Pharisees and Herodians both feel threatened by the large crowds following Jesus, and so they team up to entrap him with a question about paying taxes to the emperor.

They pose a TRICK question. If Jesus answered yes, he may appear to be aligned with an oppressive empire using an extreme taxing system and he may lose followers. If answered no, he could be immediately tried for treason. With this question, they thought they were setting him up for failure.

But when Jesus asks them to produce a coin with Cesar's image, they reveal THEMSELVES as being complicit in a corrupt system. You see they are in the temple- a place where no carved images of any living things are allowed.

When they could so easily produce the coin that is used for the tax to the emperor IN THE TEMPLE- Jesus reveals their actions as being out of sync with the values they proclaim. Jesus reveals that they are trapped in a corrupt system just as much as they were trying to catch him in their trap.

A few weeks away from election, this nation knows better than anyone right now what it looks like to be trapped in a political system that is no longer functioning at its best.

I was surprised to learn recently that the percentage of US Citizens who trust the federal government to do what is right has fallen steadily from 77% in 1964 to 17% in 2019.¹ We as an American people have lost faith with the whole system.

Our churches in the ELCA have not escaped this loss of trust in our government. Last year, due to increasing conflict in congregations on this subject, Leaders of

¹ Pew Research Center in Michael Cooper White, "Discipleship in a Democracy," Living Lutheran, October 2020.

our denomination were prompted to start a process of writing a social statement on civic engagement to create some clarity and consensus on, What does it mean to be faithful disciples when it comes to civic engagement even if the civic systems THEMSELVES seem to be broken?²

This text in particular has been used over the years to suggest that as an answer to this question, we as people of faith SEPARATE and DIS-ENGAGE when things get “too political.”

But that’s not what Jesus did. Rather, he draws attention to the one who holds power over the WHOLE system and over ALL creation- to God. And to God’s vision for the world, which is to liberate all people trapped in ANY kind of oppressive system.

By drawing attention to the image of the emperor on the coin- he also draws attention to what has GOD’S image – humans! Genesis tells us: “God created humankind^[e] in [God’s] image.” Jesus essentially says go ahead and give the coin to the emperor (it’s just a piece of silver), but here in this temple and in our faith,

² Michael Cooper White, “Discipleship in a Democracy,” Living Lutheran, October 2020.

WE hold God's image and we give our whole ENTIRE selves to God- which frees us to use our physical, mental, spiritual AND POLITICAL selves to join in God's vision of liberation & healing for everyone.

To condemn the excessive Roman Imperial forces that trapped people into back breaking work. To free people from the abuse of power. To heal the sick trapped on the margins with little access to basic healthcare. To create new ways of relating to each other.

Like the Israelites, like the Jewish people and the religious leaders questioning Jesus, we live in a broken world with broken systems.

But through our text today, Jesus reminds us that we are God's- marked with God's image- and God is still at work through us to enact God's vision for the world. Just as God used Cyrus to enact God's vision to LIBERATE the Israelites from a forced exile (as we read in Isaiah), so God works through government and human activity WHEN it is aligned with God's vision for justice and equality for all people.

And as we join into enacting this vision, we live into our baptismal vocation, of which we are reminded this morning. In baptism, God through the Holy Spirit, marks us with the cross of Christ. And we are no longer trapped. Christ frees us from death-dealing forces, to being able to walk and act in the world, as the body of Christ.

Lutheran Scholar and Pastor Jan Rippentrop describes this call of Christians to put their faith in action in the world as “a cross shaped path from death to liberation and new life.”³

When we condemn the abuse of power. When we seek the benefits of government to be distributed equally. When we vote and participate in the current political system, while at the same time trying to reform the broken parts of it.

And when we follow God’s vision and Jesus’ mission to liberate trapped peoples whenever/however we can- we ***more fully*** live out God’s image in us and “the ***cross*** shaped path” leading to liberation and new life.

Amen.

³ Jan Rippentrop, “Called to be Political,” Women of the ELCA. Page 5. <https://www.womenoftheelca.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Calledtobepolitical.pdf>