

10.22.23

Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22

Focus Statement: Christ's way is love.

We've been walking through the Old Testament all fall. And we're going to go back to it next week. But given the current world events in Israel and Palestine, the land we've been steadily marching towards all summer, I want to take a look at our Gospel text this morning, see if we can find, if not some answers, at least some hope as to how things could be different. Because in Genesis and Exodus we saw God promise this land to God's people, whom God shaped and blessed so they, so we, could be people of hope, people of trust, people of peace and care and concern. And we define God's people as all people, since all people were created in God's image and all people were called good by God, how do we, what can we, do to find hope for healing in the face of such pain.

Now you might be thinking, we're going to get to violence through this text? This is a text about paying taxes. Which, yes, but there's more going on here. So let's unpack the political situation Jesus was living in, and you'll see where we're going with this.

We've been marching our way verse by verse through Matthew for the last few weeks now. We started in chapter twenty-one, right on the heels of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, with Jesus in the temple where his authority was questioned by the chief priests and the elders. In response to their challenge, Jesus told a series of three parables. From these parables, our text today opened by telling us that "the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said." So they asked him a series of three trick questions, trying to get him to say the wrong thing. The first question is the one we read

today, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Here's why this is a loaded question. The tax in question was not just any tax, it was a particular tax known as the census tax, or head tax, which had been instituted in 6 CE when Judea became a Roman province. The point of this tax was to accelerate Judea's acquiescence to their Roman occupiers by overtaking their monetary system. Because unlike other taxes, which could be paid in Judean coins, the head tax could only be paid in Roman coin. And Roman coin had on them a picture of the emperor and the phrase, "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest." In other words, printed right on the coin was a violation of the first commandment. Claiming Emperor Augustus as divine was a proclamation of loyalty to a god who was not God. These coins were actually the reason there were moneychangers at the temple, so that travelers could convert their blasphemous Roman coins to Judean coins before they entered God's holy sanctum.

That's a lot of history to tell you that this question is about more than taxes. In fact, this tax was so loaded that its inception triggered a wave of protests that by the time of this question being asked, there was fierce opposition to it. The Judean nationalists, who would become the Zealot movement that would eventually lead to the Jewish-Roman war of 66 AD, were vehemently, even violently, against paying the tax. So here's the bind the Pharisees thought they had Jesus in. If Jesus said, yes, pay the tax, the nationalists would be enraged, and he would be alienated from many of his most radical followers. But if he said no, the tax should not be paid, well, that was an act of rebellion against the Emperor, and Rome had ways of dealing with those who tried to foment rebellion. This was a question

meant to force Jesus to pick a side, was he a nationalist or an imperialist? Did he stand with the occupiers or with the zealots? With which earthly power did his loyalties lie?

But instead of picking a side, instead of answering the question, Jesus did what Jesus did so skillfully, he changed the course of the question. "Show me the coin used for the tax." This too is a trick question. Why? Remember where this conversation took place, inside the temple. And remember what was printed on the coin, a picture the emperor and a declaration that the emperor was a god. By producing such a coin within the confines of the temple, he forced the Pharisees to show their hand, to demonstrate that they too had divided loyalties, they too were engaged in, benefitting from, the Roman economic system. Your motives aren't pure, Jesus showed the Pharisees, this is a question not of justice but of power. "Give to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God what is God's" isn't about the separation of church and state, that is a uniquely American concept that would make no sense to Jesus' audience. It isn't a call for us to pay taxes and give offering to the church. It honestly has nothing to do with money at all. It is Jesus using the Pharisees question to make a different point entirely, do not try to group me with either the zealots or the Romans, for both are grappling for earthly power. Seek a different way.

Dear people of God, the Hamas attack on Israel last weekend was brutally, horribly, unspeakably violent. There is no excuse, no justification, for such gruesome acts of terrorism as we saw carried out on innocent civilians. And what is happening in Gaza to Palestinian civilians right now is a humanitarian crisis, has been a humanitarian crisis for decades. Palestinians have lived, worked, and worshiped in this land since time

immemorial, and their lives too have value. Dear people of God, we can walk and chew gum at the same time. We can hold tension between two truths. We can denounce the egregious acts of Hamas, acts that have led to unspeakable loss of life and hope. And at the same time, we can denounce the indiscriminate retaliation of Israel against the Palestinian people, both Christian and Muslim. We can, like Jesus point to, advocate for, call out, the need for a third way. A way that recognizes the inherent value of all God's people, that demands that people, all people, have the divine right to live in freedom, peace, and security. Dear people of God, our church has been proclaiming this dual reality for decades, and not just proclaiming it, but actively working towards making such peace a possibility. The ELCA is close partners with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, the ELCJHL, a very long acronym, I know. Our church loves Jesus, grace, justice, and we love long and confusing acronyms. Anyway, we partner with ELCJHL, to support inter-religious schools, where Christian and Muslim students are educated side-by-side. These schools teach religion, both religions. Not for the purpose of conversion, but so Christian and Muslim children can grow up next to each other, as peers, learning about and respecting each other's faith traditions from a young age so that they can become future leaders and bringers of peace. The ELCA is a founding member of Shoulder-to-Shoulder, a multi-faith coalition of thirty-seven religious traditions, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, to stand in solidarity with our Muslim neighbors. We also recognize our church's complicity and need to atone for historic acts of antisemitism. In 1994, the ELCA released a declaration repudiating the antisemitic writings of Martin Luther, words used to justify the holocaust. Since the 2000s, we have been in dialogue with Reform Judaism to increase sharing and understanding between our two religious traditions.

Dear people of God, this is hard work. It is confusing work. It is complicated work. It is so much easier to point the finger of blame, and we live in a time and a culture that longs for easy answers. But to truly seek the kingdom of God, as Jesus demonstrated to the Pharisees, there are no easy answers. There is only the long, hard, beautiful, gracious, and sacred work of loving this scarred, broken, and blessed people whom God has called good. Of calling out evil wherever it appears, of never being afraid to call a thing a thing and speaking out against injustice even among our closest friends. And, and, doing this, trusting that God is always, bigger, stronger, more majestic, more all-encompassing, than all of our pain. To circle back around, that is the Exodus text. The Exodus text is Moses demonstrating the kind of courage it takes to stand up even to God. To say, God these people are all your people. These are not my people God, they are yours, and we, all of us, together, will go nowhere unless you lead us. Moses said to God, "show me your glory." And God responded, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord,' and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." But, God added, but you cannot see my face, for I am always bigger than your imagination, more wonderful than your hopes, stronger than your desperation, more glorious than anything.

Dear people of God, I do not have easy answers for you, for there are no easy answers. All I have is the encouragement that you, that we, avoid easy answers and instead do the hard work of believing there is a third way, a way that embraces the inherent worth of all God's children. For if we claim and believe that God created all humanity, than be we Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, any faith or no faith, we have been created in the image of

God. All I have for you is this prayer, which is from our hymnal and which Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton shared in a letter to ELCJHL Presiding Bishop Sani-Ibrahim Azar. So, we pray: God, our refuge and strength, you have bound us together in a common life. In all our conflicts, help us to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, to listen for your voice amid competing claims, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen