

A People Defined by Love

Sermon 76 | Greystone Baptist Church | October 11, 2020

Matthew 22: 15 - 22

I don't know if you've heard, but there's a little election coming up in just 23 days. It doesn't feel like just any ordinary election as both sides of our two-party system have created platforms that are defined by opposition to the other leaving little room for voters who might prefer to think outside the party lines. This one feels different.

People of all political persuasions feel anxious, nervous, and afraid about what this peculiar political season will mean for our nation and our churches. The painful rhetoric and divisions of past elections is fresh in our memory. We know how quickly our fellowship is broken by comments on social media and hateful rhetoric repeated in Sunday school classrooms and around Wednesday night dinner tables.

Some say that politics - more specifically, elections - should have nothing to do with the church, but as we have learned before, the two cannot help but inform one another. Politicians know that religion is an important motivator for voters and so they cater parts of their platforms to specific religious groups. People of faith also merge the two as we recognize that we are whole and integrated people who cannot separate our religious convictions from our political solutions. Baptists know this well. One of our founding principals is "the separation of church and state". This concept is fleshed out in all three *Faith and Message Statements* from 1925, 1963, and 2000. This tenant doesn't start in 1925, it is echoed throughout the writings of our founders from John Smyth to John Leland, from Thomas Helwys to Roger Williams. And it endures today as one of the only things Baptists can agree upon. Need proof? More than fifteen different kinds of Baptists have pooled funds to support the work of one Baptist organization located in Washington D.C. This organization, called the Baptist Joint Committee represents over 10 million Baptists who agree on one thing: religious liberty. I don't know about you, but the fact that 10 million Baptists could agree on anything at all gets my attention.

Even as we affirm religious liberty and the separation of church and state, it is important to note another thread that exists in Baptist history. From 1612 to 2020, Baptists insist that that the state should have no control over matters of religious practice but that each individual person has the sole privilege and responsibility to determine how their faith will influence their political engagement.

Luckily, even though we have the sole authority to make these decisions for ourselves, we don't have to do this alone. If we pay attention to our Bibles, we might find that Jesus, too, lived in a divisive political environment. One in which the stakes were awfully high and siding with the wrong party could cost somebody their life.

Today's reading from Matthew's Gospel finds Jesus confronted by the Pharisees and Herodians. The Herodians, of course, being in cahoots with the Roman Empire as their name suggests. Herod was King of Judea but he was a well-known collaborator with Rome. For this reason, the Pharisees distanced themselves from the Herod. When

delegates from each of these two groups approach Jesus together, the trap is set. The question posed seems simple: *Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?* But the simple question will have no simple answer. If Jesus says that it is *not* lawful to pay tribute to the Emperor, Jesus is a traitor, an enemy of Rome. If Jesus says it *is* lawful to pay taxes to Rome, he sides with the Herodians and his credibility as a prophet is completely undermined by his political allegiance.

It is a no-win situation. Both sides are problematic and everybody is waiting to see into which camp, Jesus will fall. Jesus sees the trap for what it is and calls out his questioners for their malice. But then follows by asking for the coin in question. Not only were Judeans expected to pay the tax, but they were expected to pay it with Roman money. Jesus, didn't have any Roman money on him but the Pharisees and the Herodians did.

Unfortunately many of us tend to overlook this little detail, which leads us to interpret the spoken response, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's" as if Jesus is calling us to live with divided loyalties. For a long time, Christians have interpreted this text as if we, too, are being called to live with divided loyalties. To offer our political selves to one side or another – often justifying our allegiance with the anecdote that ours was a choice between the lesser of two evils. Jesus' response here, though, in the 22nd chapter of Matthew calls us to question the whole situation that is unfolding.

Rather than to make the choice *for us*, about what we should do with the coin that bears the emperor's face and name, Jesus asks us to answer the bigger question *for ourselves*. Which kingdom comes first in our lives? To which authority do we owe our first and primary allegiance? And if we answer that question as if Christ is our Lord, then what on earth do we own that could possibly belong to Caesar? Duke theologian, Stanley Hauerwas says that according to Jesus, the sheer fact that the Pharisees and Herodians had the Roman coin suggests that they'd already sold their souls to kingdom of Rome. But Jesus, Hauerwas contends, "reminds those who carry the coin of the second commandment: 'You shall not make for yourself an idol...'"¹

What if we've gotten it wrong all these years, when we've interpreted this text as if it permitted us to separate our economic and political lives from our relational and spiritual lives?

What if we have been fixated on Jesus' words as if they give permission to deal with our money as if it isn't an idol at all but rather something that is merely delegated to our secular selves?

What if we've missed the point altogether and Jesus is trying to tell us that just by holding the coin in our grip – we are already aligning ourselves with the empire whose name is imprinted upon it.

¹ Hauerwas, 190

Well, we may say to ourselves, Jesus didn't live in *our* world. It's impossible to live without some kind of relationship with money... What are we to do?

It is an insoluble problem.

But according to Hauerwas, "to recognize that we have an insoluble problem is to begin to follow Jesus."

To recognize that we have an insoluble problem is to begin to follow Jesus.

Ahh, now that makes sense! As we let this settle in a bit, before long we can remember all the dichotomies and impossible situations into which Jesus intervened: Samaritans and Jews, Pharisees and Prophets, Purity and Humanity... complex situations that seem to have no path forward. And then we remember the early church and its set of insoluble problems: Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free... It wouldn't take us long to come up with a list like these for every generation. We are oh so good at creating impossible situations and divisions that seem to have no way of reconciliation.

Jesus reminds us here and in so many of his teachings that there is always another way, a creative way, a way that brings people together rather than driving them apart, a way of kindness, a way of peace, ...a way of love.

In his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman writes about Love as the only option when we face life's insoluble problems. "Love of the enemy means a fundamental attack must first be made on the enemy status," he writes.² To truly love one has to sort out all kinds of misunderstandings through honest and truthful dialogue. To truly love one has to refrain from using harsh words, to snuff out the hot temper of anger, and to set aside any pride that comes from a belief that we alone have the right answers. To truly love means to recognize the humanity in the one who stands across the aisle from us as a beloved child of God, worthy of our respect, and deserving of our compassion.

When faced with the impossible situation, the insoluble problem about Herodians and seditious, Jesus's response was defined by this kind of love.

Even though the question seemed to be about money and taxes, the real question was about loyalty and allegiance. And when asked to pledge his allegiance to one party or another, to the Herodians or the Pharisees, Jesus chose love instead. We already know from Matthew 6:24, that "no one can serve two masters... that one cannot serve both God and money," so Jesus makes a choice here... a choice which liberates him from the two-party trap the Pharisees and Herodians have set before him, and one that sets him on a pathway that leads straight to the cross. Still, Jesus chooses love.

I wonder how many of us feel that we are facing an impossible situation, an insoluble problem, as this political season rages on? Everywhere we turn there is pressure from both

² Thurman

sides, demanding that we make our choice and place our loyalty within one party or the other.

These choices are critically important but we must be careful not to lose sight of our bigger loyalty, not to place our hope in either one of the Caesar's whose names are on a political ballot because as Christians, you and I, we must always choose that third way, the way of love.

Regardless of our political ideas our first and only allegiance is made clear with our baptismal confession that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Therefore, though this impossible season rages on around us, we cannot become defined by one side or the other. We cannot serve two masters. We cannot make for ourselves an idol of money or party or anything other than God's own self. Because at the end of the day, there will be a winner... and regardless of who that is, the church's mission will remain unchanged. We will continue our work of love in the world. Love that knows no boundary of race, gender, class, or nationality. Love that makes no enemies, harbors no anger, does not defend itself with pride or arrogance. Love that recognizes the humanity in all of God's children and love that works to reconcile all of God's creation.

This is the love to which we are all called as followers of Jesus... This is the love we must embody in every moment. This is a love that *could actually* heal the world from all of the impossible and insoluble problems we have created for ourselves.

But we have to remember that this love requires our whole selves, not only our spiritual or religious selves. We must allow this love to guide our feet, each and every defining step, closer to the heart of God, the love of Christ poured out into this world.

I don't know if you've heard... but we've got a choice to make in 23 days, in every day before then and in every day after...

Will we be trapped by the choices the Herodians and Pharisees lay out before us? Or will we choose our own path, becoming a people defined by love?