TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Loyalties* Matthew 22:15-22

For the last few Sundays, we have been reading through the Gospel of Matthew as he recorded Jesus’ debates and comments with the Pharisees and other religious officials. They have been closely watching him ever since he arrived in Jerusalem.

As you may remember: Jesus’ arrival had begun with supporters and well-wishers gathering close, spreading their garments on the road before him, while others cut palm branches and shouted, “Hosanna!” On that day, Matthew says, people were praising Jesus; calling him “the Son of David” as he rode into town on the back of a donkey—the very image of the “Reign of Peace.” A new kind of sovereign and a new kind of sovereignty. Can anyone tell me what day that was? Palm Sunday, very good.

On Palm Sunday, they were doing what we were doing yesterday in the parade, making quite a ruckus. As Matthew records this, he asks us to reflect on whether we would have joined the crowd as openly and as noisily as the people around Jesus did that day. Would we have risked attracting the notice of the Romans, or even our own people, the Pharisees?

The Pharisees themselves might have ignored him as another figure who had managed to make a name for himself among the rabble. They dealt with such individuals daily. However, this time it was different. This man was different. The loyal following he was gathering was beginning to be a threat. The fact that people were openly greeting him as some kind of royal personage was also worrisome. What if the Romans noticed? It did not help matters that Jesus was quite determined to make his presence known.

Lest we forget: Jesus’ first order of business after entering Jerusalem was to go straight to the Temple where he chased out the people selling animals. These were the people who met to the pilgrims coming into the Temple needing an animal to give the priests for sacrifice.

This morning’s Bible passage also mentions coins—Jesus is asked if it is lawful to pay taxes. There is a connection to be made there. His response is to ask to see one, and so, it is important to remember a few things about that coin.

First, it had the image of Ceasar on it. So, it is a Roman coin. Second, inasmuch as the Romans insisted that Ceasar was their emperor *and* their God, the coin was a pocket-sized idol—which the Jews had to use for buying and selling in the marketplace. However, idols, of any sort, were supposed to be avoided, especially when having anything to do with the Temple. So, third, what was such a pious Jew doing carrying-around a *Roman* coin in the first place?

And finally, going back to Jesus’ first moments in the Temple, and the tables he overturned—those were the tables of the money changers. The coin boxes that Jesus scattered onto the floor were filled with Roman coins that were being exchanged for Temple currency, Temple coins, which the pilgrims needed in order to purchase the animal sacrifices.

All of this comes full circle in this morning’s passage.

The very coins and the idol they signified; the way in which the Roman occupation of the land was forcing God’s people to participate in the idolatrous ways of the world—all this is brought into sharp relief in this passage, because Matthew—the writer of the Gospel—will not let righteousness and justice go—not for a moment, not even for a second.

Matthew’s main concern, throughout his Gospel, is to tell the story of Jesus and his desire for justice, for a kind of moral equality—a balancing of the ethical scales, so to speak, so that they were honest and “true” in a quantitative, but especially a *qualitative* way.

This is not hard to imagine because, as I am sure you remember, Matthew is the disciple who had been a tax collector before Jesus called him. In other words: Matthew had been a Roman collaborator who had embraced Roman laws and the Roman taxation of the nation.

Taxes were always a burden on the people, but Roman taxes were more than that. To support the huge bureaucracy in Jerusalem, and all the way back to Rome—all of the Roman organizational needs, all of the hundreds of soldiers, officials, etc.—the taxes that were imposed in occupied lands like Judea were heavy and difficult enough. What made Roman taxes even more of a burden was the way in which they were collected.

In ancient Judea, under Roman occupation, tax collectors were also bookkeepers. They had to be, and like all good bookkeepers, they were exacting because they were under Roman rule and oversight.

Here is the part that caused tax collectors to be so hated and excluded: to pay the tax collectors themselves, the Romans allowed them to add a surcharge on the taxes they levied, as their fee. Depending on how wealthy a tax collector wanted to be had a direct bearing on how large a surcharge he was willing to place on the taxpayers. Additionally, tax collectors like Matthew had to be scrupulous about keeping their accounts so that the Romans did not suspect them of cheating them.

This was the balancing act the tax collectors were living with. Indeed, this was the way everyone in that place and time were living—even the ones to whom Jesus was speaking. Everyone—the high and the low—was trying to figure out how to live between the dangers and strife of the occupation, and the requirements of God—and everyone was looking for a loophole so that their necks are not too far outstretched, and their loyalty to God was left at least somewhat intact.

In case you have not noticed, the situation has not changed all that much since Jesus walked upon the earth. We are all still looking for that balance. Some of us are still looking for that *loophole*. And in this passage, Jesus *seems* to provide us that,…or does he?

In the exchange between the Pharisees, the Herodians, and Jesus, Jesus says: “Render unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar, and unto God that which belongs to God.” [v.21] (And yes, I just used an odd voice, and the language of the King James version of the Bible—it just fits better right there!)

On the face of it, Jesus has answered the question. However, what the Pharisees immediately recognize is that he has just given them the most perfect answer…which is not really an answer at all. Rather, Jesus has just issued them a challenge.

From now on, they are going to have to decide just what in their lives *does* belong to God? They are going to have to ask themselves: where does my loyalty lie in any (and every) given moment in my life?

Does this sound rather harmless, rather innocent, and innocuous to you? If it does, that is the point…and it is also the problem.

What made the Pharisees and Herodians scuttle away from Jesus as quickly as they could that day is that Jesus had just exposed their hypocrisy. As the words fell from his mouth, what came to their minds were all of the ways in which this question of loyalty had been put before them. They remembered with sudden clarity that everything, *everything* belongs to God. And so, they also remembered the number of times and ways which they had chosen their faith and loyalty to God. However, they also remembered the number of times and ways in which they had not.

This is what I believe Matthew saw in this exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees. He saw his own complicity, and he saw how Jesus saw it. Indeed, Matthew recorded this episode in Jesus’ life so that we would remember and reflect on our own struggles with our loyalty to God.

What Matthew knows is that the struggle with this question is so frequent that it becomes commonplace, even familiar. Instead of being a moment for reflection, in our busy lives, these moments of decision, when “the world” intrudes” upon our relationship with God, we calculate the lapse as a small, momentary thing, and we go on, almost without noticing. Sometimes the challenge is big enough that we are momentarily embarrassed. Mostly, we do not even notice. We just go on. This is what Matthew has retained in this story of Jesus’ life.

What Matthew wants us to know is that our life in the world is going to constantly ask us to decide where we are placing our loyalties. Is it going to be with God, or will it be in some other institution, or in one of the many human beings that populate our lives and imaginations? How are we answering that question? Are we, at least, aware of the times and ways in which we do answer it?

Jesus knew our daily struggle with our loyalties. He who was perfect in his choices knew how we struggle. Matthew also knew because his life choice to be a tax collector had marked him as one who had yielded to the temptations of the world of power and riches. More than any of the other disciples, Matthew’s life before becoming a disciple exemplified the old saying: “If you can’t beat them, join them.” So, Matthew went to work for the Romans.

He knew the heavy toll it had taken on his relationship with God and his community. However, he had believed he had made a good choice, a wise one. Matthew probably made a good living and thought he had made a good career move. He may even have been happy, or content…until Jesus called him to follow. Very often, we do become content with things the way they are…until we remember our commitment to Christ.

One of my favorite commentators, Dr. Karoline M. Lewis at Luther Seminary, in St. Paul, Minnesota, put it this way when she wrote about this passage:

*As soon as we get comfortable or complacent …; as soon as we think our voice cannot be heard or that it will be silenced anyway; as soon as we think resistance is futile; as soon as we think marches don’t matter; as soon as we think our phone calls to our representatives and senators will only end up in a voicemail box; as soon as we assume racism and sexism, xenophobia and homophobia are so systemic that our efforts to speak up and speak out won’t be of importance, Matthew comes along and reminds us that persistence is the hallmark of the Kingdom* (or kin-dom) *of Heaven.*

As usual, there is some bad news and some good news associated with our meditations on our relationship with Christ, and our loyalty to God and our faith.

The bad news is that the choices about our loyalty are constantly being asked of us in large and small ways. The bad news is that, often, we choose what is expedient. We put aside the notion that every gesture of loyalty we make toward some other entity but God is a lapse—especially when it is so small we do not even notice.

The good news is this: there is going to be another chance to make a better choice—sometimes in the very next moment. The even better news is that there are all sorts of examples all around us of people making the hard, but blessed choice, for faithfulness—sometimes even in the face of overwhelming opposition. Most of us here could name a few such people—some of us may even know a few such people personally.

I do, and so I would like to name my friend, Jack Shilling. Jack died many years ago, but I still remember him and who he was.

Jack lived through WWII as an adult. During those years, he had friends who had been incarcerated in one of the camps in California. Their crime was being Japanese.

Jack told me how he would mail books and other comforts to his friends. The problem was: the other people at the post office would often harass him for doing this, and for having Japanese friends. Happily, this did not stop him.

I would also like to name all the people who were at the Pride Parade yesterday. I would like to thank them for the love they showed…but also for their patience. I found out something about parades yesterday. Parades take a lot of waiting. I thank everyone for their patience, especially since it was so hot yesterday.

But here, my friends, is the best news of all that I know of: it is that whatever our choices—especially the ones we are not glad of—Jesus knows of them, and he is ready to receive our sincere feelings of remorse. Moreover, Jesus is eager to offer us his forgiveness, and help us start again.

That is who he is, and who we are to him. And I pray that this is who we know ourselves to be. We are people who can make tremendous choices that bring more love and goodness into the world by choosing Christ’s ways. We are people whom Jesus knows and loves and is always ready to forgive and help to begin again. We are people who belong to God. So, take that and go and be blessed so that you may be a blessing. Amen.