

“Grace and Peace”

Proper24A, Matthew 22:15-22; 1 Thess. 1:1-10

Grace Church Newton

October 22, 2023

THIS IS A DRAFT TEXT OF THE HOMILY. IT MAY VARY FROM THE PRESENTED VERSION. PLEASE EXCUSE TYPOS AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS, AND DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As followers of Jesus, what is our way of being in the world? Today’s gospel offers an opening into this question. When tested by his theological / political counterparts, Jesus takes the opportunity to offer a word to the people who followed in his way – to those of us who to this day try to follow in his way. Today’s passage helps us think about this question: What is our way of being in the world?

Where we pick up in Matthew this morning, Jesus is in the middle of a series of debates with Jewish leaders, Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, “an authority in the law.” In each of these interactions, Jesus, in the way that he does, talks himself out of a trap that has been laid for him. Through this chapter, these debates, Jesus sort of reminds me of a folk hero – one of those characters who, by wit and charisma, can talk themselves out of tricky circumstances and leave their interlocutors with their jaws dropped, speechless in response. In today’s text he manages to do just that.

To recap the story, the Pharisees and the Herodians send their disciples to try to trick Jesus. They ask: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” The people who ask this question seem to think they’ve presented Jesus with a riddle that has no good answer. If Jesus says, “Yes, it is lawful and expected that one would pay taxes to the emperor,” he risks alienating those among his followers who are poor and oppressed by Rome, who can’t afford the taxes that are being levied on them. If he answers, “No, one need not contribute to Rome,” he could be branded a rebel and pursued for encouraging insurrection, putting himself and his followers at risk. Tricky. Of course, Jesus being Jesus, he sees through their guise. He refuses to be trapped or pinned down to allow someone else to define the terms on which he moves in the world.

Instead of answering a “yes” or “no” question with “yes” or “no,” Jesus responds: “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Hmm. Where does that leave us? We might be tempted to ask the straightforward question: “Well, then, what *does* belong to Caesar, and what belongs to God?” How do we

figure that out? Some commentators point toward subsequent verses in this same chapter of Matthew to help guide our thinking as we consider this question. As the debates continue, Matthew reports that an “expert in the law” asks Jesus, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” We probably all know Jesus’ response by heart: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt 22:34-40). The fulfillment of the law – that is, living into this great commandment – would suggest that our ultimate value – our first commandment – is devotion to God as lived out in our love of neighbor. If we do that first, then the rest will follow, including what we owe “Caesar,” or stated differently, what we owe to society. Jesus puts God’s kingdom above all, and our response to Caesar’s kingdom follows from that.

So what does it look like, then, to put love of God and neighbor above all else, and let our engagement with the world flow from that higher commitment? One thing I think it means, is that there isn’t one easy answer. Each of us must decide. Based on how we understand our commitment to loving God and neighbor, each of us must discern how we relate to the society of which we are a part.

This is where Paul might have something to say. I know we didn’t hear the second reading this morning – thank you Jim for sharing a moment of gratitude. If we had heard Paul today, we would have been hearing the oldest words recorded in the New Testament, the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. Paul’s approach is more subtle, but he, too, presents a contrast between God’s way and Caesar’s way, offering a commentary on the Roman Empire and the deference due to Roman leaders, / or not. In Paul’s greeting to the gathering in Thessalonica, he begins with these words: “Grace to you and peace” (1 Thess 1:1) – a typical greeting for this time – “grace and peace.” Paul then goes on to praise the Thessalonians for their “triad of Christian virtues” [[Source](#), 185], in his words their “work of **faith** and labor of **love** and steadfastness of **hope**” (1 Thess 1:3). Faith, love, and hope. For Paul, these are the hallmarks of how those who follow in the way of Jesus walk in the world.

In contrast to his greeting of “grace and peace,” Paul then references the Roman slogan – some might say propaganda – “peace and security” – a ubiquitous phrase that marked Roman presence...on coins, statues, Roman architecture across the Empire.

- Paul greets Christians with “grace and peace.” He then he proclaims that the Imperial phrase “peace and security” carries with it destruction and violence.
- For Paul, followers of Jesus manifest the virtues of faith, love, and hope; followers of Caesar carried the sword.

- Followers of Jesus serve “the living and true God,” in Paul’s words [1 Thess 1:9], in contrast with those who followed the imperial cult, worshipping Caesar who wanted to be honored as a god.

So, Jesus presents us with a choice: we must decide how we will hold as primary our discipleship in the face of the world’s expectations. And then Paul further develops the contrast – our gifts are faith, love, and hope as opposed to violence and false security.

I’ve noticed an increasing presence of essays in the popular press recently that seem to be circling around this topic: how do we walk in this world together? Collectively, they seem to be working with the idea that, in our place, in our time, the thing that our world most needs has to do with relationship, with really seeing each other. Arthur Brooks, for example, in *The Atlantic* this week, references the “dark triad” of personality traits in people he labels as “malignant narcissists.” These are people who, in keeping with these characteristics might hold the attitude of “It’s all about me, I am willing to hurt you for my gain, and I don’t care how you feel.” In contrast with these “dark triad” characteristics, Brooks describes a “light triad.” People who live out the “light triad” have “faith in humanity” (that is, “trusting in people’s fundamental goodness”), they “believe[ing] in the dignity and worth of each person,” and they refuse to use other people as instruments to pursue their own desires [[Source](#)]. He encourages us to be “light triad” people, to seek out and encourage other “light triad” people.

Similarly, another commentator named Brooks, David Brooks, in the NYT on Friday published an essay entitled “The Essential Skills for Being Human.” The key comment in this piece is this (and I’m quoting):

“The real process of...creating community involves performing a series of small, concrete actions well: being curious about other people; disagreeing without poisoning relationships; revealing vulnerability at an appropriate pace; being a good listener; knowing how to ask for and offer forgiveness; knowing how to host a gathering where everyone feels embraced; knowing how to see things from another’s point of view.”

He continues:

“The issue is that we lack practical knowledge about how to give one another the attention we crave” (end quote) [[Source](#)].

Being a light in the world. Seeking true relationship with those around us. Seeing the inherent dignity in each person. These are spiritual disciplines. They are a practice of discipleship. A countercultural choice, in the language of today's gospel, to prioritize God over Caesar.

I believe that we as church continue to hold these gifts. I believe we have something to offer each other, here within the church and to those in our community beyond these walls. My question is this: what will we do with this heritage, this treasure that we have received and sustained?

Today's gospel is an example of Jesus refusing to be caught in an either-or proposition, in a black and white conception of the world. His words call to each of us through the centuries to decide how we will live into his more expansive understanding. What does your discipleship look like? How will you live out faith, love, and hope? What is your way of being in the world?

Amen.