



**THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
OCTOBER 18, 2020  
MATTHEW 22:15-22 NRSV  
PREACHING IN THE PURPLE ZONE**

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21 They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." 22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

**SERMON**

So, people of CLC... the 2020 Election is a little over two weeks away... how are we feeling about our country today? How are we feeling about our two presidential candidates this morning? (Don't answer that out loud, I'm asking rhetorically, just to be clear.)

What in the world am I doing, asking you that, in church??

Some congregations are so averse to referencing the sociopolitical sphere, that even mentioning the above is basically akin to stepping into the pulpit and dropping profanity. It's only slightly a joke for pastors, that when you get political from the pulpit, you might want to have your office cleaned out and your bags packed, just in case. Many congregations across the land go week in and week out without ever touching any of these things, because it's simply too dangerous. Preachers by the thousands remain as politically neutral as they possibly can, and keep their sermons inoffensive and vanilla, for fear of getting people riled up.

But is this how things ought to be, for the People of God? Is this okay, this environment in which we're afraid to engage the sociopolitical sphere in church? Is it acceptable to live in fear of discussing the hard things that need discussed in our world, because we're terrified that we'll upset each other?

Not everything in life that needs to be discussed, is easy or fun to discuss. That doesn't mean it doesn't still need to be discussed.



As it turns out, there is a method to my madness. This fall, I am taking a course in seminary entitled, “Preaching in the Purple Zone” - the purple zone being that confluence where the American political blue and red sides converge. So yes, as it turns out, my apparent career suicide this morning actually is a school assignment.

So with this theme in mind, it may appear that our Gospel reading for this morning was chosen intentionally, for this topic... but actually, it just happens to be the case that this was the lectionary reading for this week. (Funny how things just work out sometimes...) And in this reading, we can see that our Lord himself, most definitely did not shy away from discussing the uncomfortable, the challenging, or the controversial. Jesus was not afraid of commenting on the sociopolitical matters of the day. Jesus did not hesitate to enter into the dialogue zone.

Now mind you of course, in this story, Jesus' opponents didn't offer him terribly much choice... the Pharisees and Herodians conspire together to try to trap Jesus in his words. They confront him publicly, in front of everyone in the Temple courts, and he can't very well avoid or ignore them. But he could have chosen to refuse comment on the matter. If Jesus wanted to play it safe and avoid offending the fewest people possible, he could simply have refused to take a side... and in fact, in interpreting this story over the last 2,000 years, there are those who see Jesus doing exactly that, refusing to take a hard stance on the matter. But that's not exactly what he's doing.

It can't really be emphasized enough, friends, how controversial was this matter, for the Jewish peoples of first century Palestine. Paying taxes to the Romans was one of their loaded, hot button topics of the day. The discussion was sure to provoke gut emotional reactions as visceral as those you felt when I asked the question with which I led off this sermon.

The Romans were infamous in the first century world for their oppressive, sky high taxation rates. The Romans absolutely bled their subject peoples dry. A peasant class that could barely keep food on their own table and the roof over their own head, was forced to hand over a sizable percentage of what very little they had, so that Caesar could build yet more lavish monuments to himself, wrap himself in luxury, and even worse, for the monotheistic Jewish people, erect temples and offer sacrifices to the Roman gods. All with their hard earned denarii.

And yet, as the Jewish leaders reluctantly reminded the people time and again, in exchange for their taxes and their obedience, the Romans allowed the Jewish people a surprising amount of freedom and safety, compared to other Roman subjects – the Jews were allowed to live in their own land, they were allowed to practice their own religion without being forced to worship the Roman gods, and they were offered military protection from the surrounding cultures. The Romans built aqueducts, roads, and the like. The Romans kept the proverbial trains running on



time. Apologists for Rome could, and did, argue that life wasn't half bad under Rome, and could be much worse – let's not rock the boat, shall we?

On the other hand, of course, the opposition – embodied most clearly by the Zealot party of that day, of which Jesus' apostle Simon was a member – could and did argue that we're betraying who we are, we are betraying the God of Israel, we are forgetting our heritage, we're allowing ourselves to be bullied and oppressed and taxed literally to death, and in a way, we are being forced to worship the Roman gods, even if indirectly, by virtue of our tax monies being spent in the Roman temples. Heck with this! By all means LET'S rock the boat!! We won't tolerate one more minute of this!! We'd rather die as free Jewish peoples, than live one more minute kowtowing to Rome. Who's with me?!

It was this loaded environment which frames the question posed to Jesus in the Gospel reading. They're trying to force Jesus to endorse one side or the other – if he endorses payment of the taxes, he's a Roman collaborator and he loses the support of all those who oppose Rome. On the other hand, if he opposes payment of the taxes, he appears to be an extremist, possibly dangerous and seditious, and maybe we can get him arrested by the Romans.

Jesus' response to them is what's critical here. “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Some see him as remaining neutral, uninterested, refusing to take a side. But does he do that, really?

He technically does not refuse to pay the tax. He also does not explicitly endorse Roman rule, either. And in fact, he does not even immediately give them a response – he asks them questions. “Whose portrait is this? Whose inscription is this?” He engages them. He tries to get them to think for themselves.

Is it possible that maybe, just maybe, Jesus sees merit to both sides of the discussion? On the one hand you have those Jews dead set against Roman rule and willing to die for their liberation, and then you have those on the opposing end of the spectrum, favoring a policy of appeasement, playing it safe – is it possible that Jesus understands both sides? Is it possible that he acknowledges there is truth to be found in both arguments, and that there are good, godly people on both sides of the divide, who are just trying to do what they think is right?

There is a difference between saying Jesus remained neutral, not taking any side, and saying that in a way, Jesus endorses and critiques, both sides. The former would be to suggest that Jesus refuses to get involved in the discussion at all, because he has no opinion – he could simply have replied “No comment” and walked away, but he did not do that. He engaged in the dialogue (albeit with few words, which is his style) and offered commentary on the matter. He



validated legitimate concerns on both sides of the divide, while also not endorsing extremism on either position.

Could he have offered us a template to follow? We know that it's our highest calling as Jesus' followers to daily imitate him in every aspect of our lives. Why would the sociopolitical sphere, be any different??

It isn't for no reason that we call the Church the “Body of Christ”; the Church is, among other things, the continuation of Christ's presence in the world. WE are here to be God's hands and feet, continuing Jesus' ministry in his bodily absence. It's our mission to be Jesus for the people of the world. It's our purpose to make Jesus present in the global village of the human family. That means if Jesus did not shy away from the tough conversations, we can't either. Perhaps it's time that we reevaluate the old assumption that politics and hot button social matters, have no place in the pulpits of our churches.

If one thing is for sure, we've learned, especially over the past four years in our country, that the world is in more dire need of the Gospel, and for calm, rational, civil discourse, than ever before – and that, by the way, is not an indictment of either side of the political divide, to the exclusion of the other. Our political climate in the past several years has brought out some of the worst in people on both sides of the aisle. Jesus would not idly stand by and watch the hate and vitriol fly, without comment, and neither can his Church, the continuation of his presence among the peoples of the world.

The problem, of course, is that the Church's formal voice on Sunday morning is typically that of the preacher alone – the preacher is a human being like any other human being, who has their own political leanings – and so if they begin to get sociopolitical from the pulpit, doesn't that mean we'll only hear their side?? To the exclusion of the other side, which is probably represented by as many as half the people in the pews?? Isn't that unfair??

Yes, this is a legitimate concern... which is why perhaps we need a new paradigm for understanding how the Church will share prophetic messages in today's world. Perhaps what's needed is not a monologue, but a dialogue. Perhaps in order to make sure the Church's prophetic voice represents all members of the community equally, the preacher's voice needs to be informed by discourse, in which the community is represented.

As I mentioned a short while ago, I'm taking a course this fall entitled, “Preaching in the Purple Zone”, in which we're studying a book of the same name by Lexington Theological Seminary homiletics professor, Dr. Leah Schade. In her book, Dr. Schade suggests a format for congregations to engage in sociopolitical discourse, which she calls the “sermon-dialogue-sermon method.” Dr. Schade proposes that congregations enter into such discussions by the



preacher first introducing the topic in a sermon, such as this one today. The congregation then attends an educational event she calls a “deliberative dialogue”, in which the community will share their thoughts and feelings on the subject matter, with the preacher. The preacher then preaches a second sermon on the same topic, this time reflecting the input of the People of God, allowing their voices to be part of the Church's proclamation.

Today, the topic I'm introducing to you all is not a specific hot button issue, but rather the topic of how the Church should be involved in such discussions in the first place. I'd like to study an issue guide produced by the Kettering Foundation entitled, “The Church's Role in a Divided Society”. I'd like to invite any who are interested, to join me this coming Wednesday, the 21st, at 7 PM in the social hall, where (while we wear masks and socially distance, of course) we can discuss this, and discern together, as a community. Heck, I might even be generous and provide some light refreshments, who knows. There, you can share what YOU think “The Church's Role in a Divided Society” should be... should the Church be more actively prophetic? Would you like to see the Church taking a more assertive, outspoken role in the sociopolitical sphere? Or are you firmly committed to the position that this isn't any of the Church's business, and it should stick to stories about Jesus and leave the politics to the politicians? Or maybe you think that the church should at least be a place where we can have these discussions to help people frame these issues from a biblical and theological perspective. We want to hear from you – no matter where you are located on the sociopolitical spectrum; that's the point of the dialogue. It's not truly the WHOLE CHURCH'S prophetic voice, if yours isn't a part of it.

As we enter this dialogue, we can trust that the Spirit of Christ will guide our conversation, just as Jesus guided the discussion about divisive issues long ago. My hunch is that as we learn more about each other, we may learn more about who God is and what God does – even in the midst of this polarized time. Jesus invites us to this dialogue, and we can have faith in the presence of Jesus. Amen.