



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. LINZI STAHLECKER, CURATE
THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 24A, OCTOBER 22, 2023
ISAIAH 45:1-7; PSALM 96; 1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-10; MATTHEW 22:15-22

AN UNEXPECTED ANSWER

Matthew 22:15-22 *[The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 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." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.]*

In the chapters leading up to today's Gospel reading, Jesus is asked a lot of questions. Folks don't understand who he is or what's going on around him. Some are curious, others threatened, and others aren't sure what to believe and long for Jesus just be clear about who he is and why he's here.

We far prefer the relief of knowing, rather than the discomfort of things not making sense. And Jesus' teaching is disrupting

and destabilizing – it's often not clear. Who is he, what's he doing? What should we do, how should we respond to him? We ask questions. We ask to make some sort of sense of what we're seeing or hearing, but don't quite understand.

These last couple of weeks, with all that's going on in Gaza, Israel and the Middle East, a lot of questions are being asked, because there's a lot we're trying to make sense of.

And yet questions are often asked to make the unknown 'fit'. Faced with uncertainty or confusion, we often ask questions to try to fit an unknown thing into what we think we do know, take an unknown thing and make it work with the world as we see it, as we believe it is. And so, we want to know who's good and who's evil, who do we support, and who should we blame? Was this inevitable – can it be justified? Who should we listen to or follow?

And for the folks around Jesus, Jesus just doesn't fit, doesn't quite make sense, so they ask questions to make him fit, to make who he is makes sense to them: if Jesus is a revolutionary, we kinda know how to respond, if he supports the Empire we'll sort of know what to do next.

And so, Jesus is asked the question we hear today: is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor?

Jesus answers with the now legendary response: give to the Emperor that which is the Emperor's and to God, that which is God's.

Two thousand years on, and we also want Jesus' answer to fit with the world as we know it ... so we might hear in his

response that we're to keep our civic, earthly life separate from our spiritual or religious life. Yet, those asking Jesus this question were *amazed* when they heard his response. Amazed. By the way he answered their question.

Amazement, I might argue, is rarely a response to a clearly stated, and matter-of-fact answer.

We often ask questions hoping for an answer that'll fit with what we expect of the world. The question put to Jesus was intended to test him, get him to identify himself as either one thing or another.

Yet, in asking a question, there is always a risk that we might be unexpectedly surprised by the answer we get. With every question we ask we actually risk being changed by what we hear or learn.

Those who put the question to Jesus are *amazed* by his response. They might also be described as astonished, or astounded, or even as filled with awe or wonder. And so, to reduce Jesus' answer to their question to one that fits easily with the way we already see the world, to assume he's suggesting we keep our civic and

spiritual lives separate ... I think that has us missing a key part of his teaching.

I think, with his response, Jesus jolts the gathered group into remembering what they know deep in their being, deeper down and more intrinsically, more fundamentally than their day-to-day mind might acknowledge. They remember that, as the Psalmist puts it, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell therein."¹ And this is why they are amazed.

They're perhaps struck by this insight, now impossible to un-see. They are suddenly fully aware of this truth that their day-to-day mind had forgotten. They leave him, they go away, and we are left to imagine what they do next, what this epiphany may lead them to do next, in what new ways they might now begin to respond to the broken, hurting world around them. The next step is theirs to take, their healing transformation perhaps now under way.

So what might this teaching offer us today in the midst of our own questioning?

What kind of answers are we expecting? Are we hoping for answers that might make the great de-stabilizing and dreadful events of our world fit somehow with the assumptions we already have about the way things are, have been, and always will be? Or are we willing to take a risk, to be receptive, to understand the world and all that is in it in a new way, and to be changed, to be transformed by that?

In this most recent outbreak of violence, millions are terrified, thousands have lost their lives, the landscape decimated, buildings reduced to rubble, the air and waters poisoned by munitions and destruction, wildlife gone - the traumas of war absorbed by the earth, and by the bodies of the survivors, to be known and felt by countless future generations.

Can this ever make sense? Should it? Should we even attempt to make this suffering fit with the world as we have come to believe it is, and then just carry on with our answers, but with broken, heavy hearts?

¹ Psalm 24:1

Jesus, today, reminds us of who and what we *really* are, what this world really is. That we are God's own, *all of us*, every breath of life on this incredible planet, every rock, stream, and drop of rain, every ray of sunlight and star in the sky is God's own, and our lives are ours to live because of this. And this, today, should rightly amaze us, we should be astonished by this truth - and in this remembering, as we encounter this insight, we are assured that we can, and in fact we *must*, risk new ways of being, *new* ways of understanding the world around us and what could be. We can and we must imagine new and renewed ways to share this glorious world and its resources, in ways that are just and life-giving for all, as it is all God's own.

Are we willing to take a risk, to feel the jolt of a fresh understanding that could change the questions we ask, are we willing to be changed by what Jesus is teaching us, transformed by our life in Christ?

I want to close this morning with the words of Palestinian priest and liberation theologian Naim Ateek: Do not dilute the strength of Jesus' message: do not shun it, do not dismiss it as unreal and impractical. Do not cut it to your size, trying to make it more applicable to real life in the world. Do not change it so that it will suit you. Keep it as it is: aspire to it, desire it, and work with God for its achievement.²

² Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, (Orbis Books, Maryknoll NY: 1989), 184.

