

Sermon - Proper 24, Year A- Render Unto Caesar
10/22/23

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

When I was in seminary, it was a great blessing of mine to have the chance to visit the Holy Land. A group of us students traveled together to Tel Aviv, and we spent three vibrant weeks living in Jerusalem and Nazareth, traveling to Bethlehem and all throughout the Galilee, and making our way amidst the various holy sites that mark the path of a Christian pilgrim. When I arrived in Jerusalem, I was expecting to encounter holy places – churches and shrines, ripe with millennia of prayer. I was expecting to encounter holy people – priests and nuns and wise, discerning teachers. But I wasn't expecting that one of the most profound lessons of pilgrimage I would encounter that winter would come from another source: the wild, enduring, courageous, and continual witness of the Holy Land's feral cats.

If you've visited Israel and Palestine, you might recall this missionary contingent to which I'm referring. Wherever you visit, whatever path you walk between church and shrine and street cafe, you will meet a lively population of these four-legged friends.

Now, cats in and of themselves are interesting to me, as one who loves animals, but what is most compelling about the Holy Land cats is that they seem to come to us from another dimension entirely. They are operating fully according to their own sort of logic. They defy absolutely every expectation that the rest of us humans are obligated to consider. While my group of pilgrims was waiting patiently in the long security line to enter the visiting area near the Western Wall, no fewer than three cats waltzed right through the checkpoint. Soldiers with large rifles inspected each one of us, but reached down – every so often – to pet a passing kitten. This was the story everywhere – where human beings were divided by faith or economic status or gender – the cats roamed free. Palestinian checkpoint, Israeli checkpoint, American checkpoint –

doesn't matter. Cats don't have passports. They don't *need* passports. In a land that survives on a patchwork of laws and expectations holding a series of complicated histories together, the Holy Land cats transcend the mechanisms of both state and status. They walk in this world, and yet they belong to a world apart – with its own strange and defiant sort of logic.

We encounter a similar upending of logic in the Gospel from St. Matthew today. Once again, the Pharisees who are the authoritative teachers in the temple attempt to catch Jesus in a trap. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” If Jesus says no, it is not lawful to pay, then the Roman authorities can come and arrest him, even kill him for treason. If Jesus says yes, it is indeed lawful to pay, the Jewish authorities can arrest him, even kill him for heresy. Within this logical framework, Jesus is trapped – either way.

And so Jesus, with his delightfully quick-thinking mind that shines with a light both human and divine, responds with a logic all his own. “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.” Note how Jesus does not possess any coins himself. He asks these temple teachers to provide one. When they do, he points to the image upon it – Caesar’s. This currency is marked with the sigil of the Roman Emperor. He tells them: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” It is understandable that the Gospel text recalls that the Pharisees are amazed. Theirs was a perfect trap – a simple requirement of a “yes” or “no” answer, both meant to become a stumbling block, and here is Jesus...walking right through the checkpoint without a passport at all.

It is vital for us to understand what this statement is and what it is not. When Jesus says, “give to the emperor what is the emperor’s and to God what is God’s,” he is not just establishing the separation of Church and state. He is not declaring that they are equal – Caesar and God.

Beneath this shrewd response is the invitation to recognize the reality of another dimension, another system of logic where earthly power is just another thing that belongs entirely to God.

In the Bible, Jesus is clear that money is a tool, and it is a tool that must be treated as an instrument of service to others. He cares about what money does and how we use it. He instructs his listeners to give to the poor, to not extort others, and to recognize that they cannot serve God and wealth at the same time. At the heart of his teaching is the truth that everything we have comes from God, and all of it belongs to him. Everything.

And the logic goes a step further. Not only does everything we have belong to God – everything we are belongs to God. While Caesar needs his image delivered back to him on the face of a coin, God has imprinted his image on something far more precious and valuable. In the first chapter of Genesis, God says, “let us make man in our own image...so God created them in his image, in the image of God he created them...” So yes, give Caesar his silly little coins. Help one another to do so, if necessary, but give yourselves – your souls and bodies – to the only one who is true power, true freedom, and true grace.

As Christians, we live in a world where earthly power and things like laws and taxes are a portion of our reality, but we are never, ever to forget to whom we truly belong. We are never, ever to forget that the most valuable image we see is the one we bear ourselves – the faces of our neighbors, colleagues, loved ones, and even our enemies (who are also intimately precious to God). We are invited to use things like government and civil society to help our earthly world look a little more like heaven, but ultimately, the logic of God is not about transactions or interest earned. It is a logic of self-offering, humility, transformation, and peace. It is like a little cat, wandering through a military check-point: a reminder of a goodness that cannot be governed and a joy that cannot be contained.....Amen.

