



ELECTION DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

***(This material may also be used on the Sunday preceding Election Day.)**

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Lection - Matthew 22:15-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v.15) Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. (v.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. (v.17) Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” (v.18) But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? (v.19) Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. (v.20) Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” (v.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.” (v.22) When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Lection – Mark 12:13-17 (The Message)

They sent some Pharisees and followers of Herod to bait him, hoping to catch him saying something incriminating. They came up and said, “Teacher, we know you have integrity, that you are indifferent to public opinion, don’t pander to your students and teach the way of God accurately. Tell us: Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” He knew it was a trick question, and said, “Why are you playing these games with me? Bring me a coin and let me look at it.” They handed him one. “This engraving—who does it look like? And whose name is on it?” “Caesar,” they said. Jesus said, “Give Caesar what is his, and give God what is his.” Their mouths hung open speechless.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Biblical names and expressions have often been used to depict the sojourn of African Americans from slavery to the present. Harriet Tubman's liberating efforts earned her the name "Moses." Martin Luther King, Jr., in his last speech, prophetically proclaimed "we as a people will get to the Promised Land." Twenty-five years ago, when Harold Washington overcame impossible odds and was elected mayor of Chicago, Illinois, he used biblical language to describe his victory: "We are here to celebrate a resounding victory. We have fought a good fight. We have finished our course and we have kept the faith."¹ The participation of African Americans in the political process is the redemptive result of the struggle and sacrifice of those who marched and prayed as a part of the civil rights movement which was headquartered in the black Church. Our social progress has always been spiritually rooted.

In keeping with this spiritual rooting, Election Day provides us with an opportunity to reflect on every voting booth as a "stone" of remembrance² to remind us that God made a way for marchers to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge and journey from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. Their marching feet caused President Johnson to declare, "we shall overcome," and their shed blood provided the ink for the signing of the Voting Rights Act. Election Day further reminds us that the ballot is the "rod" we have in our hands³ to facilitate our freedom and create a future of "liberty and justice for all." Dr. King reminded us "voting is more than a badge of citizenship and dignity—it is an effective tool for change." We have a responsibility to use the rod that is the ballot, inspired by the stone of remembrance, the voting booth. If our ancestors could march through the valley of the shadow of death from Selma to Montgomery, we can surely walk or drive to our local precinct and vote for the candidate whom we believe will bring justice to all on Election Day.⁴

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Matthew 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Weapons of mass distraction are being employed by persons in power, while our nation is in the throes of a recession (an economic depression for many), and a sub-prime housing crisis has left thousands of persons in my hometown (Dallas, Texas) in financial and social desperation. As I write this, 5,300 houses are being auctioned as a result of foreclosures in Dallas. As more and more persons are left homeless, the politics of personal attacks and "gotcha" are being used to manipulate the fears of the populace, while war rages in Iraq and Afghanistan with no exit strategy, while those with inadequate healthcare or no healthcare at all choose between medicine and food, and the disparate funding of public education continues to leave our children behind and suffering in a broken village of poverty and social dysfunction.

Amazingly, political weapons of mass distraction, the politics of fear and “gotcha” are not new. They are exactly what Jesus was subjected to in our text while the masses suffered from poverty and Roman oppression.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In our text, the Pharisees and Herodians engage in a political game with Jesus. Two decades earlier a tax revolt had taken place and was met with disastrous consequences. The iron fist of Roman oppression had violently suppressed the dreams of the determined Jewish revolutionaries. Jesus would have been aware of this violent suppression from Rome and knew it was a warning to all potential rebels.

The Pharisees and Herodians approach Jesus during Passover week when hopes of Messianic revolution and liberation are running high. They use a supposed faith-based concern to further their political agenda as they try to get Jesus to make a statement against the Roman government or one that will alienate his supporters. They try to set him up in order to take him down. They approach Jesus on the heels of the Palm Sunday march and demonstration for liberation. On that uplifting day, the masses cried with messianic hope, “Hosanna,” meaning “Lord, save us.” Jesus used the momentum from the march to personally revolt against the economic exploitation and injustice taking place in the Temple, and there he turned over tables and threw out money changers. This made the custodians of the status quo nervous, because his messianic movement was gaining momentum.

Thus, the Pharisees and Herodians were sent to “trap” Jesus. Here, the word “trap” is the same word that is used in reference to setting up a snare to hunt and kill an animal. Ironically, these “trappers” were usually adversarial towards each other. The Pharisees were nationalists who resented the Roman occupation and any reminder of the oppression symbolized by Roman presence. The Herodians were those whose power and positions had been conferred by Rome; they were the gatekeepers for the empire, pawns in the hands of the Empire used to maintain oppression. It has been said that “politics makes strange bedfellows.” These two groups with different ideologies who were fervent enemies temporarily join forces to engage in a game of “gotcha” against Jesus.

The Pharisees and Herodians try to get Jesus to choose between revolution, which has been implied by his Palm Sunday demonstration and accommodation to oppression. They begin by offering a patronizing compliment. They laud Jesus for being a man of character and conviction. Then they ask him about paying taxes. If he says they should not pay taxes, the intelligence network will get word to Rome, and he and his followers could be victims of the same violent consequences met by those who incited the tax revolt two decades earlier. If he says yes, they should pay taxes, it will disappoint those who have placed their hopes for justice on the shoulders of this messiah, and they will label him a hypocritical traitor.

But Jesus sees through the political charade and responds astutely and with frankness. Their compliments do not sway or divert him. He is clothed in his right mind. He asks the

trap-setters for a Roman coin and ironically they have it. Dr. Michael Joseph Brown points out in True to Our Native Land, an African American New Testament Commentary that “they are asking if it is right to participate in a system in which they already participate.”⁵ Jews so resented the occupation by Rome that they refused to use Roman currency in Judah, even though they had to use it to pay taxes to Rome. In trying to trap Jesus these tricksters may have been exposing their complicity with an oppressive system. Why are they carrying a Roman coin? Are they connected to the Roman oppressors, at least ideologically, if not in beliefs and deeds?

Jesus, with brilliant verbal dexterity, flips the script and puts the onus on these strange political bedfellows to answer the question they have posed. Jesus asks whose image and inscription is on the coin and they reply “the emperor’s.” Jesus, the incarnation of truth, then tells them to “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s.” His answer ensnares them in the trap they set for him.

The profundity of Jesus’ response is not license for us to separate the sacred from the secular, which we too often do. Instead, it is intended to help us make a determination regarding our ultimate allegiance. Jesus’ audience was aware of the scriptural mandate to have no other gods before God. Caesar was regarded as a god by the Roman populace. Jesus challenges his enemies to check their politics at the altar of ultimate allegiance. If our ultimate allegiance is to Christ, it will make us involved citizens who vote for persons and fight for policies that are consistent with his principles of justice and compassion. Since politics has to do with the distribution of resources and if we believe “the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein,” followers of Christ must participate in the political process with a view toward the just distribution of resources and compassion for the “least of these.”

This text challenges us to engage the political process, remembering that our ultimate allegiance belongs to God. God is not a card carrying member of any political party. God is not right wing or left wing, Democrat, Republican or Independent, Socialist or Communist. So, we dare not drape any flag around the cross. Cross-bearers “speak truth to power” and help governments embrace what is best for nations and the world.

Celebration

The enemies of Jesus were so amazed that they “left him and went away.” They came full of evil intentions but left with empty hands. The end they had in mind for Jesus did not come to pass. This is the victorious testimony of people of faith who dare to participate in the political process, fueled by their ultimate allegiance to almighty God. Even when political enemies of justice, peace, and freedom appear to have the forces of good trapped, God has a way of making a way where there is no way.

The enemies of Jesus were “amazed.” God will use us in ways that amaze and surprise those who use political systems to trap others. The viciousness of those who used a political system to beat back freedom marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in March of 1965, was amazingly used to open the eyes of the nation to the ugliness of racial

oppression and moved a President and Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965. I can hardly wait to see God's next amazing move.

Descriptive Details

The text unfolds with anticipation, anxiety, and confrontation all in the air. The followers of our Lord and Liberator are excitedly expecting that their long night of suffering under Roman oppression is coming to an end. The demonstration on Palm Sunday and the atmosphere of messianic hope engendered by the season of Passover has the citizenry animated with the expectation of political revolution. The streets of Jerusalem are unusually crowded because of the presence of Passover pilgrims who have made their journey from everywhere for this holy season. Hear the sounds and see the colorful sights of this scene.

A climate of confrontation is apparent in this setting. The authorities are on edge and plots are being conceived to get rid of this Galilean troublemaker. The popularity of Jesus has the enemies of Jesus attempting to use subterfuge to set him up for a destructive end. Listen to the plots of Jesus' enemies and their attempts to trap him.

III. Other Sermonic Comments

- Instead of being a gatekeeper, we should seek to be door wedges. A wedge keeps a door open for others to come through. Gatekeepers are servants of the system and help keep the oppressed under control. This distinction is made by Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor in "The Substance of Things Hoped For."⁶
- In Aesop's fables he tells of a bird that dropped bread out of its mouth, because it had to respond to the compliments of a fox. How much bread, substance, that we need, have we dropped because were lured by the compliments of the world?

***Special thanks to Reverend Leroy Elliott of Chicago, Illinois for the use of his version of "A Change Is Going to Come."**

Notes

1. A reference to 2nd Timothy 4:7.
2. A reference to Joshua 4:19-24.
3. A reference to Exodus 4:1-7.
4. For further information, Google "African American Voting" and "Harold Washington;" and also read: King, Martin Luther, and James Melvin Washington. A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1986. p.183.
5. Blount, Brian K., Cain Hope Felder, Clarice Jannette Martin, and Emerson B. Powery. True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007. p. 113.

6. Proctor, Samuel D. The Substance of Things Hoped for: A Memoir of African-American Faith. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1996.