

Proper 24A October 22, 2017

Back to the Beginning

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Back in the beginning, a serpent set a clever trap by asking a clever question, “Did God say you cannot eat from any tree in the garden?” This was not long after God had done a lot of creating, after God had created the world, the sun, moon and stars, the plants and animals and human kind, or so the story goes. Actually, it’s how one of the stories go, as many people forget that the beginning of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, starts with not one but two creation stories. These two stories are not identical, but their differences are never set against each other, they are simply both there, as if an editor couldn’t decide which was the better of the two so let them both stand together without seamlessness.

The first story is the one that is often forgotten, maybe because it lacks the drama and tragic ending of the second story, the one with the serpent and the fruit and the tree. The first one is all about how good God’s creation is, and how delighted God was in God’s creation, including animals like serpents, and of course, humankind, who God made, if you recall, in God’s own image and likeness.

In the second creation story, seems the first man and the first woman forgot that story too. Because the woman took the bait the serpent set in its clever question. And when the serpent told her if she ate the fruit she would be like God, well that is the trap she and all of humankind often falls into. That was the phrase that got her thinking about that fruit, to discern if it was edible or not, and forgot she didn’t need fruit to be like God, she was already made in God’s own image. The man, if you recall, did no better, he ate the fruit too and the rest of the story goes on to describe how fear entered into humankind’s relationship with God, and how fear led to blame and blame led to separation. I encourage you to open up your Bibles at home and read both stories for yourself, instead of only letting someone tell you about them.

They are good stories. Together they show how easy it is to forget and take the bait, to fall for the traps that can be set for us, traps that often begin with the question, what do you think, and lead to taking a side, causing division. Traps that are as old as time itself it seems, because they can be found in the very beginning.

Traps like the one set for Jesus in today's Gospel reading. Like that of the serpent, it was a clever trap. Prior to this part of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus had entered Jerusalem on a donkey, with crowds waving palm branches and shouting hosannas, all of which were symbols of religious revolution. And if that wasn't enough to make the powerful nervous, Jesus had entered the temple and turned over the tables of the money changers, another act with a powerful message of revolution. He'd also told some parables that did not go over well with the religious leaders of his day.

In short, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem had made him really popular with the crowds of people, they were going to the temple to hear what he had to say, hoping for a revolution. And Jesus' entry into Jerusalem had made him hated by political and religious power groups. Interestingly, we heard in Matthew's Gospel that two of those groups, the Pharisees and Herodians, which historians tell us were often at odds with each other, came together to trap Jesus, for they saw him as a common enemy. That is a temptation that is pretty hard for us humans to resist: ganging up on what we perceive to be a common enemy.

And their trap was so good it is hard for even those of us encountering it centuries later in a completely different part of the world to resist: a trap that seems to be about money and power we see in the question: "is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

I'm assuming none of us likes to pay taxes. Well, it was far worse in Jesus' day. Because the tax was not quite like our tax system which is how things like roads, libraries, schools, fire departments, police departments, and other public facilities and services are funded. The tax Jesus was asked about was the tax imposed on people by the Roman empire, who the Jewish people saw as invaders who had taken over and the tax they asked for was part of how the empire was funded. That might mean roads, but

the roads were not first and foremost for the public good, they were how the empire moved its army from one place to another. It goes without saying that for the Jewish people of Jesus' day, this tax was unjust and a painful reminder of the oppression they lived under.

That is one reason the question was an easy trap to fall into, because if Jesus answered it was not lawful to pay the tax, he would make himself an enemy of the Roman Empire and the empire would make short work of him. Of course, we know Jesus died on a cross, which is how Romans executed criminals, but Jesus did not die for siding against paying a tax, he died for something deeper than that, he died because of what humankind forgot. If he answered the trick question in a way that sounded like he sided with Rome he would lose all credibility for being someone who spoke for God. At first glance, then this looks like a pretty good trap for Jesus. But unlike the first woman, and unlike most of us, Jesus didn't take the bait.

If we look closer at his answer in Matthew's Gospel, we can see he rose above the temptation by going back to the beginning. I say that because translators and scholars noticed something particular about how the author of Matthew wrote the answer Jesus gave when he asked for a coin.

Now the coin he asked for wasn't just any coin, it was the coin that was used to pay the tax in question, as only a Roman coin could pay the Roman tax. It was a Roman coin stamped, much like our own American coins, with the image of the head of the Roman Emperor Caesar. This image wasn't the only thing stamped on the coin, so were the titles of emperor, which included the "son of god" and "head priest", terms that would have caused any pious Jew to seethe, as those terms were used for their sacred and holy rites and beliefs.

It's interesting to note, Jesus himself did not have such a coin in his possession. He had to ask for one. Which could mean something about the person who had the coin, something Jesus wanted them to notice, and perhaps us too, as one of those unspoken lessons, and may be why he called the people trying to trick him hypocrites.

Then Jesus seemed to ask an obvious question, and it's too bad the translation we have says "whose head is on this coin" because the word the author of Matthew used here doesn't really mean head. The Greek word the author used is the word icon, and is the same word used in the Greek translation of Genesis that said humankind was made in the icon or image of God. It seems in Matthew's version of Jesus' answer, Matthew has Jesus taking his listeners back to the very beginning, to remind them of what the first man and woman forgot: in whose image they were made. It's a good reminder for us too.

So, the comment "give to Caesar the things that are Caesars and give God the things that are God's" is not necessarily a term that says there is separation, that we followers of Jesus are free to follow whatever empire we align ourselves to most days and follow Jesus only on Sundays. It doesn't even necessarily mean it's the duty of humans to fall in line with the demands of empires. Instead that comment may have been an amazing statement that empires are not the same thing as God's creation. Empires are formed out of power and fear, and will use whatever they can to keep power, including taking resources of others, violence, force, and intimidation. Empires function on the false notion that the only god they need is the leader they worship.

God's creation, on the other hand, came out of God's desire to create, to enjoy beauty, to provide for the creation, and many theologians have said God's desire was to walk with humankind in the garden, as a way of enjoying the unique connection humankind has with God, for only humankind is made in the image of God. While that term, "made in the image of God", has never really been satisfactorily defined, it is what distinguishes humankind from the rest of creation. Some argue it means God wants us to be co-creators with God and that is why we have free will. Others argue it means we can discern what is of God and what isn't. Many say that is what Jesus came to show us; how to live into being made in the image of God: to love God and each other as God loves us. To love God and each other in the most difficult and darkest days, to walk through painful times like grief, tragedy, trauma, loss, or fear to realize that even if we hadn't noticed before, God is right there with us. To love God and each

other through times of change by finding new ways to do what God would have us do, serving our communities in ways that contribute to hope not to fear. To love God and each other by seeing how we are connected to the earth and to each other, how what we do can have positive or negative effects, and choose to help heal and not hurt or destroy.

Perhaps being made in God's image can mean we are called to remember that we are not gods, but we are part of God, we are part of the Body of Christ, and marked as such in our baptisms, and we are part of each other. So, the next time someone tries to trick us into taking sides, or to gang up on a common enemy, or give in to despair that the changes around us signal the end of something precious or dear, we can remember the beginning, and rise above any temptation that will lead to more division. Instead we can stand with Jesus, and focus on what common bonds we share, how God loves all that God has made, including each of us and the person or persons we struggle with the most. So that whatever empire we find ourselves surrounded by, we can live as God would have us live, by embodying God's love in all we say and do.