

Matthew 22:15-22

Oct. 18, 2020

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, does this ever happen to you – you have two friends who are on opposite extremes on an issue and they try to lure you into their fight? I'm sure there may be a lot of that going on right now as we're in the midst of elections and ballot issues.

In the Gospel reading for today, the Pharisees and Herodians are trying to trap Jesus in one of the biggest political arguments in the land at the time – should you give your money to the oppressive government of the Roman Empire? As if you really had a choice, but it was still a debate.

The Pharisees and Herodians knew that whatever side Jesus took, he would be on the wrong side with one group or another. If he said yes, then he was a traitor against the Jews. If he said no, then the Romans would hunt him down as an insurrectionist.

They actually really didn't even care which way Jesus answered, they really didn't care what he had to say. They really weren't looking to learn anything new. Their only interest was in getting Jesus killed and they thought they had a fool proof plan, but then Jesus turns the table on them by asking them a question.

Right now there appears to be a lot of division in our country – one side heavily against the other – even ready to take up arms – on both sides - but I'm not really sure that that's the truth for the majority of us.

Yes, we all have our candidates and things that we are voting for or against, but do we really hate each other that much? Really?

Right now, opposite extremes are trying to get us to take up a fight against each other and to hate each other. Politicians are sly. They use our emotions to get what they want – into office, into positions of power. And, you know the old saying of being “played like a fiddle?” Politicians study how we respond to everything so that they can get what they want.

So, what are we, as Christians to do in the midst of intense and even violent debate? Do we take up arms? Do we fight and declare what we know to be right? Or, do we ask questions?

Jesus asked a question of the Herodians and Pharisees. Jesus asked them about the item in question, “Whose picture is on the coin? Whose name?”

Instead of joining the human fight he was invited to, Jesus turns a political question into a religious question, because Jesus’ ultimate concern is the Kingdom of God. So, Jesus follows up their invitation to a fight with a question as to where their own allegiances lie – is it with God or is it with the Emperor? Or is it with the Temple, or is it with the sect they belong to, or who is it exactly?

We know that Jesus’ allegiance is to God. It’s always to God and God’s Kingdom, and God’s Kingdom is all about caring for the least, last, lost, and lowly – including Pharisees and Herodians who are entirely clueless as to what is happening right in front of their own noses.

God is right there with them, but they can’t see it. All they can see is their own fear that Jesus is changing their reality. And Jesus sees that issue right away.

For God, it’s not about the money. It’s about relationships. That’s why Jesus was resurrected. The resurrection is the proclamation that not even death can separate us from God. Nothing can destroy that relationship. That’s how much we are loved, and because we are loved that much we should first and foremost love others.

So, when confronted with an intense debate, instead of taking one side or the other, we might instead ask, “Whose image is on the people in the debate?” Like Jesus asks, “Whose head and whose title is on the coin?” We might ask, “Whose image and whose name is marked on these people”

In Genesis, we remember that we are created in the image of God, and in baptism we are sealed with the cross of Christ and given the name child of God. When we look at others, can we see the image of God? Can we see the cross of Christ? Can we hear the name, “child of God”?

We are all sinners and forgiven we are saints.

The 8th Commandment reminds us to always first assume the best in other people’s actions – assume their actions are meant for good not evil. It’s also a good reminder that others may not always see our actions in the best light possible.

If we remember that. If we remember that we are forgiven of our own sins just as the other person is, I think we can look at one another with love and we can bring peace into the world instead of division, and the world really needs some peace right now.

The Pharisees and Herodians were looking for Jesus to cause division, but instead Jesus does the opposite, which is par for the course. Jesus is always bringing unity. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus is bringing all people back to God and thereby restoring our relationships with one another.

The Pharisees and Herodians wanted Jesus killed, but Jesus doesn't take the bait of hostility. Oh, Jesus will be killed, but it won't be because of their political debate. Jesus will be killed, because he won't get caught up in the petty arguments of this world. Jesus is concerned only about God's Kingdom being known in the world over and above Caesar's.

God's Kingdom is all about restoring relationships and setting the oppressed free.

Caesar regularly killed his family and friends in order to stay in power, and he used the least, last, and lowly to pay for his opulent life style.

Jesus on the other hand was killed and he never turns anyone away. He sits in love with the Pharisees, Herodians, Romans, Greeks, orphans, widows, tax collectors, prostitutes, everyone you can think of, and each of us too.

Jesus sees past all of the worries of this world and proclaims that God is with us – literally and figuratively – and God is never leaving us. So, do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to love others as God loves us so that peace can be known right here and now.

Our peace is in Christ. Our unity is in Christ. That's what we are called to embody.

As you probably know, my neighborhood is under construction. Most of the people working here are recent immigrants.

There is this one truck that is constantly driving through the neighborhood that has three big American flags flying off the back end of the truck. One says, "Don't Tread on Me," and I can't make out what the other one says.

Those flags have made me really uncomfortable for all of the immigrants that are working their butts off around here so that we can have houses to live in. My assumption of the flags waving on the back of that truck was that that man was anti-immigrant.

I had to go to the bank on Friday, so I drove slowly by that truck. I wanted to get a good look at this man that I had already judged. I wanted to see if he looked like a hateful person, but what I saw was one of the Latino workers laughing with the

white guy, and I was reminded how important it is not to judge others and not to fight other people's assumed battles. 8th Commandment.

As those two men on opposite extremes laughed with one another, Jesus was there. Above and beyond their differences, there was a relationship, and for God it's always about relationships.

You and I may disagree on issues, but because we know each other, we love one another. Regardless of our political stances, in love, we only want the best for each other. It's in those places where Jesus is found, because Jesus is all about uniting us in love, not tearing us apart in right or wrong.

Whenever we ask Jesus this or that, to take a side, Jesus always responds by asking us to see one another instead. Whose image is engraved on us? Whose name is stamped on us?

We are all children of God.

During this highly contentious time, let's remember that. Let's remember to see each other as beloved children of God. It's ok to disagree, but it's never ok to hate. Remember, Jesus was killed, he never hurts anyone. He only brings healing and restores relationships. As Christians, that's where we need to be as well.

As the old camp song goes, "They will know we are Christians by our love."

So, let's make a pact to love and be Christ's presence right here and now. Let's renew our baptismal covenant to love and serve all people, and to respect the dignity of everyone.

I know that may seem impossible in some situations, but when you feel your blood pressure rising, don't say anything, instead take a deep breath, and remember the Holy Spirit, the Pneuma, the breath of God, in, with, and among you – that's the plural you – you and the other person or persons.

We are all made in the image of God. We are sealed with the cross of Christ forever. And right now, we are being called into action, for just such a time as this.

We, as the Church, are being called to be the embodiment of God's peace here and now, because the Church is not of one mind, but of one heart – God's heart as known to us by Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.