

Isaiah 58:6-9, 11-12 ~ Matthew 22:15-22

Glimpses of Heaven on Earth: Look for the Likeness (6th of 6)

21st Sunday after Pentecost ~ Service of Healing and Wholeness ~ October 22, 2023

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Introduction

Religion and politics. Look out! Those are the topics we are taught to avoid at dinner unless we want the mashed potatoes to get cold and the conversation to get hot. Jesus gets tested in today's gospel reading with a religion and politics question pitched to him as powerful and quick as a Jhoan Duran 104.8 mph fastball. (The fastest fastball in Major League Baseball this season.) It could have been ended the season of Jesus right there that day.

Yes—we are still in the temple in Jerusalem (don't worry we *will* get out before Christmas) and Jesus is *still* being put to the test. We have finished Jesus' parables of judgment and are about to hear the first of three test questions to which Jesus will answer with a walk-off home run, except the game is not over. (Okay, you football fans, I know the Packers are playing Denver today at 3:25 P.M. but the World Series is just around the corner, which means winter is coming and no more baseball for me or for all other baseball enthusiasts until next spring....)

So, football fans bear with me: Today the pitch to Jesus is more precisely, a slider. A dangerous mix of a fastball that breaks down. And Jesus was ready for it. He could see it coming. This mix of religion and politics was cooked up by a Herodian, a pro-Roman secular political party; and by disciples of the Pharisees, Jewish religious leaders who resented the Roman occupation. Yup: Herodians and Pharisees basically hated each other. Anyone who witnessed this story or who heard it told would know this.

Yet here, in this context, sworn enemies, Mr. Political and Mr. Religious have found common cause in their opposition to Jesus. They both were threatened by Jesus for different reasons. So together they cooked up a question which they were sure would trap him. It was a loaded question: a "yes" or a "no" would have cost him. But this week I have not given the choir cue cards with the word "yes" on them. Nor did I give them the word "no." Instead, we get another glimpse (the children's Discovery Time word of the day) of heaven on earth.

Today, Jesus answered their question with a question that would break forth in unexpected, amazing light. Instead of getting trapped, Jesus reframes and redirects their trick question into a teachable moment. As we are told at the end of this story, "for all in the temple who were amazed." So too, was Matthew's audience of Christ-followers about 40 years later, trying to sort out the meaning of the destruction of Jerusalem and the second temple in 70 CE. And so too for us here in Marshfield, Wisconsin about 2000 years later in 2023: hearts breaking over the destruction of wars raging this day in Israel and the Ukraine. And anxious about the health of our own democracy here in the U.S. Good news: Jesus' season on earth is not over.

Meditation

Sit down, Herodians and disciples of the Pharisees—God's Son, The Word Made Flesh, Love Made Visible, is speaking here. What did he say? "Give therefore to the emperor the things

that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." With that answer Jesus, gently, but powerfully trapped them in their own game. And that is the essential point of this story. Jesus' refusal to be caught, frees us all. Jesus *was not* rewriting the tax code here. Nor was he giving us a pass on trying to figure out how our religion informs our politics.

His answer reminds us of a simple fact which changes everything. First we must ask ourselves: What *are* the things that are God's? Answer: Every creature and all creation. God is God of all. Yes, that includes our responsibilities as citizens and how we navigate our political life. The bigger picture, the starting point is that we are all God's children. We are made in God's image. Look around at one another if you want to see God. No matter what we do or what has been done to us. No matter how far we have run from God. Even when we are yelling, or crying, or sticking out our tongues. God still claims us as God's own beloved children. We are God's coins of great worth. So valuable that God chose to suffer and die on the cross that we could be healed, mended, transformed.

Every person, of every faith and of no faith, is God's beloved child. Every person in God's is a bearer of God's image. Here's our challenge: Is it possible for us to see each other the way God sees us instead of through our own biases? Think for a moment of a person or a group of people that you find utterly despicable for one reason or another... As you hold the image of that person or group of people, try this. Take a breath and try to see that person or group as Christ does—a person or persons made in the image of God and in need of divine love, mercy and grace. Yes, that same divine love, mercy, and grace that has been extended to us. For indeed, we are all God's offspring. That person (those people), too.

Did you know that the word "religion" comes from the Latin word, *re-ligio*, which means to reconnect, to re-bind. The primary purpose of religion is to heal, to re-bind, to reconnect what is broken. Inside of us and all around us: people, communities, nations. By God's design we were created to establish, mend, maintain relationships with other people. To reach *across* all those artificial boundaries we erect. That is our superpower.

This means that when God looks at you, God sees a breach-mender! You heard the words from Third Isaiah (chapter 58). It was written to God's chosen people as they were returning from Exile. *YOU shall be repairers of the breach, restorers of streets to live in.* Especially since October 7, our screens have been filled with image upon image of neighborhoods turned to rubble in Gaza and Israel. So too, cities in Ukraine, and Afghanistan. Right here at home, we have repair work to do on our own USA body politic.

People of faith, God looks at us and sees breach-menders. Christ came to mend and bind and heal broken hearts, relationships, communities, the whole world. The baseball season will soon be over. After today's game, the NFL season will be one third over. God's season of healing, or breach-mending is now. And it depends on us. Let's start here with our Service of Healing and Wholeness. Accept the breach as an invitation to repair: for piece by piece, thread by thread, we can heal together. Come, let's do our good work to which God is calling us. Amen.

