

Trinitarian Congregational Church

TakeOut

October 11, 2020

Announcements

Prelude

“On Eagle’s Wings”
Michael Jonas, Arr. Mark Hayes.
[Video - https://youtu.be/K3s0_ucQqsE]

Lynne Walker

Call to Worship

Leader: The Creator of all things has given us life.

Let us gather in awe to offer our songs of praise.

People: We are amazed by the wonders that surround us.

We sense God’s presence as we worship together.

Leader: The Redeemer of all mankind has named us his people.

Let us turn to God with hope and trust.

People: We are awed by the grace that upholds us.

We sense God’s blessing as we live in faith.

Leader: The Ruler of all worlds appoints us as witnesses.

Let us respond with courage and uprightness.

People: We are astonished that God chooses us as servants.

We sense God’s guidance as we follow his ways.

***Prayer of Invocation**

O God, we have been gathered by your grace to worship and praise you this day. You have formed us for your glory and called us as your witness. We long to live in ways that honor your righteousness and share your goodness, even as we recognize our selfishness and disloyalty. In this hour, as we hear the gospel, may your Holy Spirit guide us into your truth and transform our lives according to your good will. Amen.

Gloria Patri [Video - <https://youtu.be/OLz3R1hnUjs>]

Scriptures

Isa 43:1, 5-7, 10-12

¹ But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

⁵ Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;

⁶ I will say to the north, “Give them up,” and to the south, “Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—

⁷ everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

¹⁰ You are my witnesses, says the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.

Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.

¹¹ I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior.

¹² I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you;
and you are my witnesses, says the LORD.

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and took counsel how to entangle him in his talk. ¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the money for the tax." And they brought him a coin. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "Whose image and name is this?" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." ²² When they heard it, they marveled; and they left him and went away.

Special Music

"Jesus Saves" Chris Harris and Lynne Walker
William J. Kirkpatrick, Arr. Nathan J. Arnold
[Video - <https://youtu.be/2hh-9MxzWOQ>]

Sermon

"Trap Set, Game Over"

What is your favorite Saturday morning activity? Sleeping in, reading the paper, or watching cartoons? Now I know what your grandchildren will say, but what about us adults? Do you still like cartoons? I confess I do. I'm definitely beyond middle age but I still like to laugh, and I enjoy both Veggie Tales and Futurama. I remember spending my Saturday mornings watching Loony Toons, with Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck, Elmer Fudd and Porky Pig. But my very favorite was and still is, Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner.

If you remember Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner are natural enemies. And Wile E. Coyote is always setting out traps to catch the Road Runner for dinner. He buys Acme rockets, and portable holes, sets out false road signs and paints tunnels on rock walls. And without fail the Road Runner avoids them, ignores them, or redirects them and Wile E. Coyote finds the trap spring on himself!

That is where we find Jesus' opponents in today's Scripture. They are filling the role of Wile E. Coyote and setting a trap for their favorite antagonist. Now I have to admit, their trap was rather brilliant. It even began with who was present to set it. It's an unusual alliance, the coming together of Herodians and Pharisees, because generally they were political and religious adversaries.

The Pharisees were the ultra-conservatives of their day. They were non-violent leftists, closely akin in many ways to the Zealots. The Pharisees were separatists. They avoided anything that could contaminate them - morally, socially, politically or spiritually. For them, keeping the law of Moses, in all its fine detail, was paramount. The Lord was God, and the Lord is King of Israel. And so they are naturally opposed to Rome's occupation and Caesar's claim to be the 'divine emperor'.

The Herodians, on the other hand, were the political lackeys of their day. They were the supporters of

Herod - hence their name. Herod was Rome's puppet king - his sole right to rule came only from the power and pleasure of Caesar. So for the Herodians politics ruled. There was no religious ideal so sacred, no moral belief so revered, that it could not be altered, amended, or ignored to protect their political and economic interests.

So these two groups coming together is indeed "strange bedfellows." Even as they approach Jesus you know something is up. And they complement him in such a way that it is an attempt to ensnare Jesus in their game. "Teacher, we know you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men." Right there they are trying to force Jesus to answer an impossible question. 'Jesus you are too good a man to lie'. 'Jesus, you have too much integrity to avoid this one'. So here's the question "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

It's a brilliantly formed conundrum. 'According to the law of God - are we to give tribute to Caesar?' Jesus' opponents had him on the horns of a real dilemma. You see, if he said "no, don't pay the tax" the Herodians would have him arrested for treason, for inciting rebellion. And it would stick because they were there to witness his answer. But if he said "yes, pay the tax" he would be acknowledging Herod's right to rule Israel and Caesar's claims. He would be guilty of blasphemy and idolatry - and the Pharisees were witnesses. And besides, how he answered this question would have a huge impact on his followers and all those who were listening to them, because they were equally caught between Rome and the Temple, they equally disliked Herod and the Priests.

But Jesus is not taken by the trap. Like the Road Runner he just steps right through it and comes out the other side. His answer begins with the integrity his opponents just acknowledge. He calls it as he sees it, and calls them hypocrites. He criticizes them, not for any false lifestyle, but for their insincerity.

They are not looking for a real answer, and Jesus knows it. So he asks to see the Roman coin, the one used for tax purposes. And that's where he gets them. That coin had the face of Caesar on one side and on the other the words "Tiberius Caesar, majestic son of the divine Augustus." Having it on hand, in their purse, proved their duplicity. Under pure religious law having it violated two of the Ten Commandments. Yet here in the holy center of Israel, in the temple, it took no effort to hand one over. With that coin in hand, Jesus asks them to identify the image. "It is Caesar's" they reply. And now they have stepped off the cliff and Jesus is about to go 'Bleep, Bleep'. "Then return to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Can't you just see Jesus' opponents holding up a sign that says "Help me!"

We may think it is a funny, delightful expression of Jesus' wit and wisdom. And I am sure all those who were watching this exchange in the temple got a good chuckle out of it. But suddenly it is also a dead serious response and one we cannot take lightly. In fact that brief quip, that dictum has survived for 2000 years - guiding, directing, and challenging those who take Jesus' words seriously. But what do they mean? And here, for centuries, the people of God have gone in different directions.

Some have seen this word as an acknowledgment of a two party system which is more than political. There is the kingdom of this world, and the kingdom of Christ. And allegiance is due to both. Yes we are citizens of our country, so pay your taxes, send your children to war, support your president and governor and mayor. Pay Caesar his due. Work for a living Monday through Saturday and worship on Sunday. We have public, political, worldly lives. And we have private, personal, spiritual lives. One we render to Caesar, the other to God. It carries the full weight of separation of church and state. And

never the twain shall meet.

But there are other Christians who read Jesus' words completely differently and God wins every time. Jesus said "give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and give to God the things that are God's." So they ask the question "What are the things of God?" And they immediately recognize "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." That is the trump card. Reality is, nothing belongs to Caesar, it's all God's, even the coin that is stamped with Caesar's image. It is by God's good pleasure, by God's tolerance, that anyone rules. As Paul states so clearly "There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." (Romans 13:1)

And so, since God is the absolute sovereign, then politics comes under God's reign. They had better live up to Christian standards and legislate proper morality; that is, if they do not want to be overthrown. And as for all those who do not see faith or politics in their light, whether it is Jews or Muslims, liberals or conservatives, they can quietly submit or find another country to live in.

But, you know, I don't think Jesus had a 21st century political-religious dichotomy in mind, any more than he had a 1st century political-religious division in mind. I think there is another way for Jesus. One that puts us on the hook, and keeps us there. Do you remember the first part of Jesus' question? "Who's image is this?" And with that answer Jesus easily concludes "then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's." So when he says "give back to God" - the direction reverses. It is not a question of 'what things' it is as question of 'whose image'.

So what belongs to God, what bears God's image? I hope your minds are jumping now, right back to the very beginning, to Genesis, to the words "and God made humanity in his image." (Genesis 1:27) We are the image of God. You bear the stamp, the mark of the face of your creator, and I bear the mark and the image of that same creator. We are all the coin of the God's realm- man or woman, black or white, young or old, gay or straight. We are made in God's image. Rich or poor, powerful or lowly, oppressed or free, you bear the mark of God.

That is an absolutely breathtaking statement. And here's the kicker - "Give back to God that which belongs to God". Return to God, shuv, metanoia, repent, return, believe - all those things Jesus is famous for saying. It fits! "And give to God what belongs to God". Anvil dropped. Bomb exploded. Gravity hits. It is all over for Wile E. Coyote. And we are him.

The life of faith is not about parsing out divided loyalties. It is not about vaulting to the top and imposing our rule. It is not even about taxes. It's about you and God - in right relationship. It is about knowing who you are and whose you are, and how you are to be in this world. And it is about recognizing God's image is everywhere, in everything and everyone. And that God can reach you any way God chooses, and claim you any way God will.

"And God made humanity in his image." It is a truth we are quick to claim, yet fail to grasp. And we cannot escape it. If we really bear the image of God then God has rightful claim. You are God's. Your life is God's. You are not your own. So how much do you give? And, perhaps more succinctly, who has your allegiance?

And how do you decide those pesky dilemmas of life that do not seem to want to find a simple solution. After all, there are still Caesar's in this world who want their due. There is still a job to keep and a family to support, a community to maintain and a nation to preserve. Perhaps Jesus was not

pointing to the whats of life, as much as he was pointing to the who of life. And calling each of us into a way of being that relies more on grace than on law, that seeks God's face more than an agenda.

“Give to God what is God's”. Does that give you a clear definition of right and wrong? No, sorry it doesn't. Does that give you a set of simple-to-follow instructions for applying the Biblical message to the complicated issues of life. No, it doesn't. But, most important of all, it does give you one to rely on, one to seek and one to follow. It calls you to a life of radical faith of living trust and humble obedience, and I hope, regard for the gracious image of God in all we meet.

There is still a bit of Wile E Coyote in each one of us. And amazingly, there is still a lot of Road Runner in our gracious God. Perhaps it is time for us to hold up the sign that says 'Help Me.'

Amen.

Hymn

Breathe on Me, Breath of God
[Video - <https://youtu.be/0e6S7tvTyDo>]

Lynne Walker

Joys and Concerns

As you meet with God in prayer, please lift up the joys and concerns shared through the Trumpet Blast. God is eager to be your help and strength, to listen to you and meet your needs. Prayer is a gift we can always use.

Prayers of the People

O God, we thank you and praise you for all your mercy and grace to us. We are awed, that you have created us in your image, and destined us for relationship with you. We are humbled by your love that sent Jesus Christ to redeem us from our sin. We are grateful for the guidance of your Holy Spirit who transforms our lives into the character and purpose for which you created us. And so we come to you, O God, seeking help to live as Christ's disciples.

We pray for your church and for this congregation. May we be attentive to your wisdom as we discern our relationship to you, to our world, and all our brothers and sisters. May we not only rejoice in the stamp we bear, but also honor your holy image in all people.

We pray for all our leaders throughout the world. May they appreciate the responsibility you have laid on them and seek the welfare of all peoples. And grant to all your people the courage and strength to establish your ways of justice and peace for all.

We pray for all who turn to you this day. Grant your healing to the ill, your comfort to the sorrowful and your provision to the needy. We especially thank you for... and ask your continued care for... And grant that we, who know your mercy and goodness, may act with care and grace toward everyone we meet.

We praise you, Wondrous God, for all the mercies you have granted to us, through Jesus Christ who taught us to pray...

Lord's Prayer (sins)

Offering

We have come to give honor to God. We seek to be faithful to the One who calls us as his people. In our giving we recognize God's authority and offer our fidelity. Here we give but a token of those things that are God's. Let us pray.

O God, as your servant people we seek to serve you faithfully in all the things of this world. With our gifts we again commit our whole selves to you and your holy purposes. Bless them and us that all peoples may know your goodness and mercy. Amen.

Doxology [Video - <https://youtu.be/5I7PEGUPAXQ>]

*Common Commission

Let us go forth into the world in peace, being of good courage, holding fast to that which is good, rendering to no one evil for evil, strengthening the faint-hearted, supporting the weak, helping the afflicted, honoring all persons, loving and serving the Lord, and rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Benediction

Go now into the world

And may the peace of God, which transcends all human understanding, keep constant guard over your hearts and minds as they rest in Christ Jesus. Phil 4:7 adj

Go in peace to love and serve our Lord. Amen

Postlude

“Make Me a Channel of Your Peace”
St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)/Temple. Arr. Hayes.
[Video - <https://youtu.be/2GS9ThG1Rx8>]

Lynne Walker