

A COME TO JESUS MOMENT

Matthew 25.31-46

November 26, 2017

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I'm thinking about taxes this morning. It's just 36 days until I have to close the books on my income and my deductions and my charitable giving.

And, of course, I am also thinking about the tax bill on Capitol Hill right now. Honestly, I don't understand all of it. But if any of what I am hearing from both the left and from economic conservatives on the right is true, then we have great cause for concern. And if it is true that this is just another excuse to gut programs for the poor, the hungry, the unhoused, and the sick, then as someone who claims to follow the way of Jesus, I have to go on record this morning to say that this tax bill is not just a bad idea. It's also anti-Jesus.

I've been thinking about taxes in the biblical tradition and I remembered that the thing that brought down King David's powerful nation was his son's – Solomon's – tax policy that paid for all his great building projects and his son's refusal to relieve that tax burden when he took over the throne. Unjust taxes brought the end to a united Israel and it was, from that moment, forever divided.

Any of you who learned, as I did, the Christmas story from the King James Version of the Bible know that it starts like this: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed." Versions since then have described this as a "census" but you can imagine that if the Emperor wanted to count his subjects, taxes were involved somehow. In other words, this central defining story we tell about Jesus is about an internally displaced couple who have to give birth to their first child in a stable because the empire needed to get its tax records straight.

You may remember a couple weeks ago, that we were talking about a story earlier in Matthew – Matthew 22 – in which religious leaders come to Jesus with a question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?” Jesus answers by saying: “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that belong to God.” He says that knowing that all the people in that crowd know the verse in Psalms that the choir just sang; Psalm 24: “The earth is God’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” What doesn’t belong to God?

The second thing Jesus does, having asked for a coin, is to ask whose image is on the coin. That’s a problem right there because it is against their understanding of their own tradition to make any “graven image.”

Writer Debie Thomas says that this is Jesus reminding the crowd of the image in whom they all have been made – they are made in God’s image, not Caesar’s. Caesar may have his face on a coin but all creation – everything and everyone - has God’s image stamped on it. And, if they let the image of Caesar define them, they have lost the most profound and fundamental understanding of their faith. Thomas says: *... if I am really fashioned in God’s image, then I need to practice my faith and my politics in ways that reflect who God is – whether I like the current resident of the White House or not. It’s not a question of backing down, or of being dishonest, or of watering down my beliefs. It’s a question of remembering that the God whose image I bear is a God of love.*

And this, beloved ones, right now, this moment is one of those “come to Jesus moments.”

You know what I mean. I discovered a long time ago that you don’t even have to be a Christian to talk about “come to Jesus moments.” It’s any moment that faces you with what’s really at stake. Whatever else has gone on, this is serious. And it demands some kind of change.

My friend Curtis Price, the pastor Salt Lake City First Baptist, posted an article from the Huffington Post by an old seminary professor of mine, Susan Thistlethwaite. It's about a group of 300 Christian theologians attending the recent American Academy of Religion. There's a picture of them – some dressed in sackcloth and ashes – standing together to call for “repentance and change in Christianity in the United States.”

One of the theologians standing there is Dr. David Wilhite from Baylor University – that proud Southern Baptist institution:

Dr. Wilhite noted that Evangelicals “are supposed to have a come to Jesus moment.” And this time in American life, he argued, is clearly such a moment. “Evangelical Christianity has become white, male Christianity. And for this we need to repent.”

Whether Evangelical or not. Whether Christian or not. The moment we are in right now is a “come to Jesus moment.” Something is really at stake. This is serious. We need to change.

My old theology prof, finishes the article by describing this gathering as Christian theologians denouncing the kind of Christian theology that grew up in nationalist Germany under the Nazis.

It is a Christianity that literally enables hate, she says, hate for people of color, for immigrants, for those of other religions, for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender human beings, for women and girls, for the poor and the most vulnerable among us. [But, she goes on to say ...] We are not here merely to denounce ... the most important thing we can do as Christian theologians is announce the good news of the Gospel. The good news is the radical inclusivity of God, for God so loved the world. Not just some in the world who are white, or rich, or male, or heterosexual. God loved the world of animals and plants and the entire ecosystem that is a victim of the same rapaciousness and nearly mindless drive for political domination. The good news, and it is very good news, is an invitation to turn away from greed and turn toward love of neighbor. Turn away from hate and turn towards love. It's

actually more fun here in the circles of radical hospitality. Jesus said, "Love one another." And we say, "Amen."

Those theologians are right. This is, beloved ones, a "come to Jesus moment." And what is at stake is how we see ourselves and how we see others and what we do about it.

And that brings me to the text for this morning.

Matthew 25.31-46

‘When the Son of Man – or we might say now, “the Son of Humanity;” the one who helps us see what it means to be human, male and female, made in the image of God – when that one comes in glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of glory. [This is what his followers have been waiting for! Finally, God is going to come and wipe out the emperor and his henchmen and we are going to be the nation we had always hoped we would be. But wait a minute ...] All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Abba, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I

was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

I’d say that sounds like a “come to Jesus moment.” Something is at stake. This is serious. A change needs to be made.

And the change is where we go looking for the image of God. It’s about who or what we are letting define us. Are we waiting for political revolution to come before see it? Or for some all-powerful savior to show up and save us? Are we missing what is right in front us because there has to be something better coming along?

Matthew’s story tries to give us some clues about where we go looking for the image of God in humanity.

We are, as a matter of fact, on the edge of Advent when we are supposed to be preparing ourselves for the birth of that promised one among us. The angel tells Joseph at the beginning of Matthew, this child, born in questionable circumstances to an unwed mother, is Emmanuel – God with us. So you might go looking for God-with-us in people who do not fit the mold of “traditional families.”

Sometimes people ask me if I really believe this whole incarnation thing – that God took on human flesh in Jesus. And I often say that I try to believe it but the test of whether or not I actually do is how I see God in the bodies of people I wouldn’t expect. When we sing, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” we should know that what we are looking for is God-with-us in the people we might not expect.

And we aren't that far from Easter – I know, that's a scary thought – and I am preparing myself for people to ask if I really believe this resurrection thing; that Jesus died but is still alive somewhere. And I often say that I try to believe it because I've seen resurrection happen. I see the dead alive among us all the time. And Matthew's gospel ends with Jesus saying to his friends, "remember, I am with you always."

Between the beginning of the story's "God-with-us" and the end of the story "I am with you always" is this: the righteous ones, the ones who get it, will say:

Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Every hungry person you see is a come to Jesus moment. Every thirsty person, every stranger, every person who is vulnerable or sick or in prison is a come to Jesus moment.

And that means something is at stake – not just for them but for you. This is serious. Something needs to change.

And I think it's important to remember that we are also hungry and thirsty and sick and vulnerable. The Youth Group was right to remind us last Sunday that our faith calls us to solidarity, to show up for one another, to recognize in each other the image of God.

All those years ago when I was walking the streets of Chicago, alone and afraid with nowhere to go and very little money, I was someone's "come to Jesus" moment. And those people who saw that in me saved my life.

As poet Jan Richardson says:

*Today
now
this moment
may you see
the presence of God
in the face of one another
and, in seeing,
may you live.*

This is a come to Jesus moment, my friends.

Because, today, if you hear the voice of someone who is hungry or vulnerable or a stranger or sick or in prison, you don't have to try figure out whose voice it is because, according to Jesus, it's God's. And today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Debie Thomas, reflection on Matthew 22.15-22, *Christian Century*, September 27, 2017. Susan Thistlethwaite, "Repent and Believe In the Gospel! Over 300 Christian Theologians Challenge The Corruption of U.S. Christianity" at www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/repent-and-believe-in-the-gospel. Jan Richardson's poem is in her *In the Sanctuary of Women* (Upper Room Books, 2010), p.285.