

## *NOT SO RANDOM ACTS OF RESISTANCE*

Matthew 22.15-22

October 22, 2017, Pledge Sunday

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

*Choral Anthem: "Precious Lord, Take My Hand"*

I am grateful to the choir for singing what is reported to be Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s favorite hymn. I need it. And from what I hear, maybe some of you need it too.

I hear from some of you doubt that borders on despair.

I hear hopelessness that anything we do really matters.

I hear the exhaustion of what some have called "compassion fatigue."

And maybe it's good to hear Dr. King's favorite hymn today because, over the distance of time, we might imagine that Dr. King was always a tireless, confident, purveyor of hope.

But that's not so.

In 1956, at the height of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, after a long day and another threatening phone call, Dr. King writes:

*I was ready to give up. I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I determined to take my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking for leadership and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.*

This is where we cue the music:

*Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand:*

*I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;*

“At that moment,” Dr. King says, “I experienced the presence of the Divine like none before ... an inner voice, saying, “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; God will be at your side forever.”

Three nights later, his home was bombed.

And Dr. King kept standing.

Over the next 12 years there were all kinds of attempts to take Dr. King down. Perhaps one of those attempts has been all but lost to history.

In 1960, Dr. King “was the only person ever prosecuted under [Alabama’s] income tax perjury statute.” It was clearly an attempt by the government to shut Dr. King down. Two African-American lawyers – William Ming of Chicago and Hubert Delaney of New York – came down to Alabama to represent Dr. King.

So here’s the situation: Alabama state court; an all white jury; a defendant who is a trouble-making Black Baptist preacher; and two black attorneys ... from the north! What were the chances for justice?

Shockingly, after just a few hours, Dr. King was acquitted. And what he said when he was asked about the decision was: “I learned that truth and conviction in the hands of a skillful advocate could make what started out as a bigoted, prejudiced jury, choose the path of justice.”

That is, standing up for each other and standing with each other in truth and conviction and skill can sometimes create surprising – even shocking – outcomes.

I tell this story as an introduction to the lesson for today because it too is a story about trying to shut down someone perceived to be a trouble-maker by using the tax code.

**Matthew 22.15-22**

<sup>15</sup>Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. <sup>16</sup>So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. <sup>17</sup>Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” <sup>18</sup>But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup>Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup>Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” <sup>21</sup>They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” <sup>22</sup>When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

I want to point out that the preface to this question is a glowing estimation of Jesus’ character. We know you are sincere. We know you teach the way of God truthfully. We know you show deference to no one; that is, you have integrity. And we know you show no partiality, by which they seem to mean that he is someone who is not caught up in the classist system that drives the power dynamic of the day.

Now, to be clear, those last two things are probably not compliments. Showing deference to no one and showing no special preference for the religious or political classes probably wasn’t a positive thing for the Pharisees and the Herodians. But they are setting Jesus up to be held accountable for his answer, whatever it is.

And I have been thinking about this. It makes me wonder if we sometimes get caught thinking that if only those who disagree with us could see how sincere we are and how honest and how much integrity we have and how we try to love everyone, then how could they not join us in changing the world?

But it doesn’t seem to work that way.

We should be sincere and honest and have integrity and do our best to love everyone. But that doesn't mean that the authentic living of our values will automatically change things.

The people who were plotting against Jesus seem to be very generous with their praise for the character of his life. But they have no time for the way he was shaking up the system.

And the tax question was their way of trying to shut Jesus down.

This is an important moment in what would turn out to be the last days of Jesus' life. Things are coming to a head. In Matthew 21, Jesus enters Jerusalem to the shouts of great crowds. He goes to the Temple and throws out the money-changers who make a living off exchanging Roman coins into currency that can be used for the services and sacrifices of the Temple itself.

By Matthew 22, the popularity of Jesus and his attack on the financial system of the Temple make him the object of this plot.

And so two factions come calling, factions that don't usually make common cause – the Pharisees, who are doing their best to interpret the daily requirements of the law to the masses, and the Herodians who, as their name suggests, are invested in maintaining the current political establishment with the Romans.

They come together to ask a question about taxes because they recognize the jeopardy any answer would put Jesus in: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

If the answer is "yes" he will make the Herodians happy but will alienate all of his followers who are bent on resisting the oppression of Rome.

If the answer is "no" he might make some of the Pharisees happy but that would "be treason and an immediate cause for arrest."

By asking for a coin, Jesus changes the question.

“Whose image is on it?” he asks, which is a pointed question because carrying around a “graven image” is forbidden by the second commandment, depending on how you number them.

“What title?” he asks, knowing that the emperor’s title on the coin is “Son of God,” and that’s blasphemy.

And the mere fact that someone in the crowd is carrying around a Roman coin illustrates an everyday reality that people might not even pay attention to ... unless it could be used as a weapon to divide people and destroy someone: “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?” he says, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Now here, of course, the people in the crowd have a decision to make. What belongs to the emperor and what belongs to God?

Debie Thomas says:

*It’s important to note what Jesus does not say. He doesn’t say that there are two distinct realms, the religious and secular, and that they require our equal fidelity.*

The Muslim scholar, Reza Aslan, says that it is “astonishing that centuries of biblical scholarship have miscast these words” as if Jesus is dividing up the world between the material concerns of governments and taxes and the spiritual concerns of worship and obedience.

Because, after all, what *doesn’t* belong to God? Jesus knew that the people in the crowd, Pharisees and Herodians, would remember Psalm 24: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it; the world, and those who live in it.”

The emperor may have a coin with his face on it but, in the end, even that belongs to God.

I think Debie Thomas and Reza Aslan are right. This isn't Jesus dividing up the world. This isn't Jesus letting the argument about taxes divide and destroy people.

This is the ultimate act of resistance – to see everything, including ourselves, undivided, connected, held in the power of that love that belongs to all of us and to which we all belong. It's standing together and singing together and crying together and imagining together. It's pledging our lives together.

Everyday should be filled with those not so random acts of resistance.

That's why I keep that little poem by David Budbill next to my computer:

*The Emperor,  
his bullies  
and henchmen,  
terrorize the world every day  
which is why  
every day  
we need  
a little poem  
of kindness,  
a small song  
of peace,  
a brief moment  
of joy.*

I'd like to think of the Creativity Expo next weekend as a not so random act of resistance, shaking up the systems of bullying and fear with poems and songs and moments of joy.

That's the kind of resistance that Jesus stood for and Dr. King stood for and that living our values calls us to stand for.

It's not dividing up the world into material-political pieces and spiritual pieces.

This pledge and these offerings are not dividing up our resources so that we get a little something and God gets a little something.

It's hearing that call to save and to serve and to be sent out into the world in the name of love and our saying: "I'm all in."

"Here I am, Lord ... I have heard you calling in the night."

It's that call Dr. King heard on that night when he was ready to give up – that voice that said "I know you are tired and you are weak and you are worn but I'm going to help you stand; stand up for justice, stand up for truth, stand up for one another and for this world."

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

The quote from Dr. King comes at the end of his sermon, "Our God is able," *Strength to Love* (Fortress Press, 1963), pp.107-114, see 113-114. About the tax trial, see "Why Justice Matters: Remembering Martin Luther King's Tax Trial" by Kelly Phillips Erb at [www.forbes.com/sites/kellyphillipserb/2015](http://www.forbes.com/sites/kellyphillipserb/2015). There are several authors who have worked on both the Matthew 22 and Mark 12 versions of this story. I have drawn on Marcus Borg, *Convictions* (HarperOne, 2014), pp. 163-165; Debie Thomas in reflections on this text for *Christian Century*, September 27, 2017; and Reza Aslan, *Zealot*, (Random House, 2013), pp.76-78.