

“When Normal Things Happen”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 96:1-9 New Testament Lesson – Matthew 22:15-22

A Jewish folk tale tells of a man who went through a small community slandering the rabbi. One day, suddenly regretting what he had done, he begs the rabbi for forgiveness, and offers to undergo any form of penance to make amends.

The rabbi tells him to take a feather pillow from his home, cut it open, and scatter the feathers to the wind. The man does as he is told and returns to the rabbi. “Am I now forgiven?” he asks. “Almost,” says the rabbi. “You just have to perform one last task. Go and gather all the feathers.” “But that’s impossible,” cries the man. “The winds have already scattered them.” “Precisely,” says the rabbi. The slander had been done and it was now out of the man’s control.

Our world is full of things that are outside of our control, many of them even more damaging and misguided than slandering or bad-mouthing another person. When something really terrible happens – like the tragic and deadly shootings at Newtown, Conn., – we scramble for the right way to respond.

Or when the systems we live in no longer work – like our tax code system and government spending – we fret over what’s to be done, and get consumed as we fear the worst – our country in default, unable to pay it’s bills. As Christians, we may even frantically and prayerfully search for God in all this, if we haven’t given up all hope.

And that can lead to a trouble area for Christians – one that tests our faith in God Almighty – when we see tragedy on our streets and brokenness at the highest levels. The third trouble area – in a series of four that we’re looking at this month – the third trouble area that arises within the Christian faith is losing hope when things are just ***not going right*** and things seem ***completely out of our control***.

That’s what happened to the Pharisees in today’s New Testament lesson. They know that the Roman tax system is designed to create class warfare, where the rich get richer and the poor suffer in poverty and oppression. The problem is that it’s completely out of their control and they are part of the system – they’re Pharisees, who benefit from their place in society under Roman rule, over and above the people they lead, the people they are supposed to be serving as religious and social leaders.

So when Jesus comes along and starts preaching a ministry of Justice and mutual sacrifice, and lifting up the poor and the downtrodden, the Pharisees feel threatened, like the system that’s working for them is under attack.

Matthew tells us that “the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap (Jesus) in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘... Tell us, ... what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’ But Jesus, aware of their malice, says, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they bring him a denarius. Then he says to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ They answer, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he says to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’”

Jesus is saying to them – and to us – ***don’t get caught up in the system.*** Fallible and even misguided systems are a part of life, and we can’t get away from them. As Christians, we can’t remove ourselves from all that is corrupt and ungodly in this world. We live in a broken world and if we were to remove ourselves from it, then who would God send? Who would there be to serve and minister to the needy, to show and lead the misguided, to find the lost and bring them back to healthful, joyous, and godly living?

In our broken and misguided world, poverty and oppression, senseless violence and aggression, religious intolerance and persecution – these terrible things become a normal part of everyday life. And when such “normal” things happen, we don’t know how to respond. What part are we playing in such misguided systems, and what would be a faithful response?

These questions lead us to the third trouble area that arises within the Christian faith: When normal (yet misguided) things happen, we feel pulled between playing by the world’s rules – even though we know they’re wrong – and just withdrawing from the world altogether, which doesn’t do any good, either.

John Dominic Crossan, a Bible scholar who specializes in the historical Jesus, shows us how to faithfully navigate between these two extremes. Crossan views Jesus’ teaching about the Roman coin and Roman taxes as asking a different question altogether. Such teachings ask us to imagine, says Crossan, “how God would run this world if God sat on Caesar’s throne.”

It’s a fascinating question. We live in a world run by secular powers, one in which elected leaders – some Democrat, some Republican – sit ‘on Caesar’s throne.’ “Their decisions shape our world, and influence our understanding of what is right and what is wrong, what makes sense and what doesn’t.

But what if *God* sat on Caesar’s throne? How would God run this world? That’s what Crossan says this teaching is about. But it is also about what gives God pleasure,” says pastor and writer Bob Kaylor.¹ “God would run this world in a way that brought pleasure and joy. So what is it that gives God pleasure? When the lost are found; when the broken are healed; when the alienated are reconciled; when the sick are made well; when those who are dead are made alive; when the oppressed are lifted up; when the prisoner is released; when the humble have been exalted.”

¹ Senior Writer for Homiletics Online and pastor at Park City United Methodist Church, Park City, Utah.

Most of us can't do much directly to change the system where it is wrong. But we can – even living within a misguided and broken world – bring God pleasure. And the way we do that is by looking through the veil of this broken and misguided world and between the cracks in the failed systems to see those places where **God is working to make things right.**

It's a matter of tuning in, in our minds and hearts, and focusing in with our eyes on those places where God's sacred hand is actually guiding our secular world. But to do that, we need know what it looks like when God is at work in someone's life, or when God is turning the world toward God's divine purpose. We need to know in our hearts and minds where God is in all of this.

Margaret Donaldson, in her book "Human Minds: An Exploration,"² describes this humorous exchange between a mother and her 4-year-old son, Callum, around the breakfast table: "Is God everywhere?" asks Callum. "Yes, dear." "Is he in this room?" "Yes, he is." "Is he in my mug?" asks Callum. "Er-yes," says the mother. And with that, Callum claps his hand over his mug and shouts, "Got him!" Boy, wouldn't that be great to be able to look around our world and see God clear as day and shout to the heavens – "Got him!"

But actually, though God is everywhere, we rarely have our hearts and minds open to seeing what God is up to or our eyes focused on what God is doing. Too often, we find ourselves so caught up in worldly affairs that we lose track of God altogether.

And that's where our faith practices and spiritual disciplines come in. Prayer and meditation, coming to church, serving in the community, volunteering to teach Sunday school, be a Table Parent at LOGOS, serve on a committee, or any form of sacrificial giving – all of these things can change our hearts and minds and our vision regarding what's possible in the world. They can help us to see where God is at work – in our lives, among our family members, at our workplaces and schools, in the community, and beyond.

It's not enough to just work within the system to achieve the changes we decide are needed. As Christians, our job is to search within the system to see – and champion – the changes God is achieving. And to do that, we need to know where and how to find God at work in this world of ours; We need to spend some time each day, or at least every week. Cultivating our relationship with God.

When Jesus answered the Pharisees, saying "give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's," Jesus knew that the corrupt tax system belonged to Rome, but he also knew that the hearts and minds of the people belong to God. The most powerful place that God is at work right now is **in your heart and in your mind.**

If we give our hearts and minds to God, God will use us to redeem the world. If we search for where God is at work in our lives, God will lead us in how best we can be at work in the world.

² New York: Penguin Books, 1992, 80.

“In other words, we give to the emperor the coin because his image is on it, and we give to God ourselves because you and I are created in (God’s image).”³
This is God’s work in our lives – and our work in the world – to do what it takes to reclaim ourselves and our world from any and all misguided ways – bit by bit – until all creation once again reflects God’s glory. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Most loving and inviting God, you have gathered us here together from the four winds, and for each new member brought into your house we rejoice. For, from the beginning, you said it isn’t good for us to try to go through life alone, and so at creation you created for us partners to journey together.

Today we gather as pilgrims journeying together, sharing our faith, our joys and our concerns. We hold one another up when times are hard and celebrate when times are good.

(Prayer Requests)

Together, we share a bond, commitment and purpose that unite us and make us stronger. For all these things and many more, we thank you, gracious Redeemer, Healer and Comforter.

And especially, we thank you for sending us your Son, Jesus Christ, as our Lord and Savior, and in whose name we join our voices in prayer, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

³ Paul J. Nuechterlein, “A win-win answer to a lose-lose question,” October 20, 2002, *Girardian Reflections Web Site*, girardianlectionary.net.