

“When Jesus Confuses You”

March 10, 2019

Shadow Savior series – 1st Sunday in Lent

I’ve never been a huge fan of puzzles. I dabble in crosswords, but I’ve never been very good at Rubix cubes or the like. My sister can solve them quickly with little effort. She makes it look easy, but I get frustrated in no time. Anything beyond the “easy” version of Sudoku is a challenge for me, though it may be that I just give up too easily.

I offer that today as we walk this Lenten journey together. You see the word “honesty” in our space, and it will stay there in this season. I was reminded of Billy Joel’s words: “Honesty is such a lonely word; everyone is so untrue. Honesty is hardly ever heard, but mostly what I need from you.” Now, I don’t think he’s necessarily talking about faith, but I wonder if that might be how God sometimes feels about us.

We may struggle to ask questions about Scripture and share our wonderings about why Jesus says what he says and does what he does. It’s not unfaithful to bring our questions to God, and studying Scripture requires some work from us. We can’t simply take it at face value without knowing the rest of the story, the context, and so on. We need courage to engage it and keep developing a life of faith that can handle the tougher questions.

“Jesus loves me” is solid theology, but what about when the pain of life is heavy, when grief overwhelms us, and when we feel far away from God? Jesus is as multi-faceted as we are. Sometimes he’s confusing.

So we’re walking with Jesus into the shadow places - the unclear, uncertain, and sometimes uncomfortable places. Jesus is our “Shadow Savior” - not always the Savior we want or expect - but the Savior we truly need. We’ve adapted a song for our series that will guide us through Lent.

My hope is that we’ll grow closer to Jesus as Lord and Savior as we come to him with honest questions and open hearts. It might even be a time to be reintroduced to him - or meet him for the first time. This is an opportunity to build a relationship with Jesus for a lifetime - not just for the moment or immediate need – because if we’re honest, sometimes we come to Jesus when we need something and only then.

It may be easy right now to share where we struggle with the church as an institution in regarding to our recent General Conference, but I invite us to dig more deeply and be honest what we find difficult about Jesus - what he says, what he does, how he responds. We’re not alone; his closest followers struggled to understand and even accept his mission. They had questions and moments of confusion.

Jesus is asked a lot of questions in the Gospels. Sometimes people really want to know something from him or want him to help, but sometimes it's just an exercise to test him or trick him. I'll be honest, sometimes I just want him to answer the question - to be crystal clear about what he wants from me. Sometimes we want Jesus to be our "answer man" rather than the very revelation of the living God, whose nature is mysterious to us.

That's how I feel about this tax question and his answer, and we've heard it before: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's." Jesus has been quoted many times by many people in arguments about paying taxes and the separation between church and state.

But we forget that the question is a trap. The Pharisees and Herodians had it all planned out. They thought they could trick Jesus with a question about taxes. After all, he'd been making outrageous indictments toward them – telling parables that put them in the hot seat.

Even back then, taxes were a volatile issue that created a stir. Did anyone hear about a gasoline tax this week? Money was and is a hot button issue. Jesus was gaining popularity. Surely taxes would trip him up.

It was early in the week of Jesus' crucifixion when he was confronted with this question - after he had come into Jerusalem to shouts of "Hosanna!" and then had gone to the Temple and gotten ticked off at what he saw there (more on that next week!). This scene is interesting, especially when we understand that the Herodians and Pharisees didn't get along or agree on much of anything.

Pharisees were Jewish teachers who followed Jewish Law very closely. They didn't like being governed by Roman rulers. They weren't supposed to recognize anyone but God as King. They resented this "poll tax" as it was called – because it meant submission to Rome. And they were hoping that the Messiah would overthrow the Roman government. Jesus hadn't lived up to their hopes. He said that the Messiah would suffer. That wasn't what they wanted to hear.

The Herodians were against Jesus, too. They were Jews, a priestly class, but they actually supported Roman rule. As their name implies, they were loyal to Herod. You may remember from the story of Jesus' birth that King Herod ordered the male children to be killed after he learned from the magi that the King of the Jews was to be born in Bethlehem. Jesus had always been a threat to the Roman king's power, and it was still the case. The Herodians wanted to discredit Jesus, too.

So Jesus was the common enemy who brought the Pharisees and Herodians together. Maybe you've had that same experience – ganging up with someone you didn't like too much to take down someone you really didn't like at all. That's what we

have here – a common goal to take down Jesus unites them. They'll try whatever it takes to get a controversy going. Jesus is a threat to their power and the status quo. He's dangerous.

The question is a trap: *Should we pay taxes to the emperor or not?* If Jesus says yes, then he loses the Pharisees completely. It's blasphemy to support Rome at all. If Jesus says no, then he could be accused of treason by the Herodians. Anything less than supporting Rome was considered a revolt.

Even though they try to flatter with compliments on how he doesn't show favoritism and how he speaks the truth, Jesus doesn't buy it. They hope that he will choose a side so that someone can stop him from gaining power. But he tricks them by asking for a coin with the image of Tiberius Caesar on it, which includes an inscription about the ruler's divinity.

The coin itself was an example of idolatry. And notice that Jesus isn't carrying any coin. Someone gives him one. When he distinguishes between Caesar and God, it's clear that he doesn't think the Roman ruler is divine.

Jesus addresses more than taxes or even whether religious people should follow civil law. His answer is about authority, loyalty, and allegiance. It's confusing if we want a simple answer; that's not what he offers. It's a "foiled again!" moment when you think you have it all figured out and then – bam! – you're the one left asking more questions. Matthew tells us that they went away amazed, and perhaps their amazement is also some confusion.

Picture it: the Pharisees and Herodians shaking their heads. Jesus looking exasperated because of this nonsense. But we're left wondering, too. This encounter has much more to do with taxes. Maybe it's about money. Or simply stewardship – how we use everything that God has provided. It's about how we live as everyday disciples of Jesus Christ. Or maybe more...

Jesus says the ultimate authority in our lives is God. Our ultimate allegiance and loyalty is to God. To say that is one thing, but to do it is quite another. Jesus calls them "hypocrites." That word comes from the Greek for actors – people who wear masks and act differently than who they really are. They were off course in their thinking. It was the wrong idea.

The coin bears Caesar's image, so Jesus says to give it back to him. But Jewish teaching held that human beings were created in the image of God. They themselves bore God's image.

That's part of our faith heritage. We are created in the image of God. Just like the coin that bears Caesar's image, everything that bears God's image or inscription is God's. *If we give the coin to the emperor because it is his image on it, then what is it*

that we give to God because God's image is on it? Jesus reply is a challenge – and a radical call to remember who we are and whose we are.

Jesus' words make me think of many competing loyalties that we hold together: God and family, God and country, work and family, even Jesus and the church! This is about whose authority we live under. Authority means control and power, and we usually don't like anyone else to be in control of our lives. But Jesus reminds us that God's authority is different from human authority. God is sovereign – beyond any system of law that we can create.

And as followers of Jesus, he is Lord of our lives. But his authority is different. He is Lord because his life, death, and resurrection give us hope beyond what we can find here on earth. He frees us to live in wholeness and peace – to share that with others – that the world might be transformed.

We have responsibilities to our government, but our call from Jesus Christ goes much deeper than that. Some take this encounter as a mandate for the separation of church and state, but that's not the issue. Taxes aren't the issue. The coin isn't the issue here. It's about giving to God what is God's anyway. It's about knowing that we belong to God.

So the Pharisees and Herodians go away amazed...and maybe confused. They wanted to pin Jesus down with their question, and they thought it would be easy. But Jesus isn't about making faith easy for us. Jesus is the One who makes the way for us, and sometimes it means we don't have easy answers. Perhaps it means we're more willing to ask questions - not as a means of testing - but as a way to have more holy conversations. I've deeply appreciated the opportunity to have heartfelt conversations in ministry, and it's the way I've grown closer to Jesus.

Sometimes I really do want Jesus to be an "answer man," but more often, it's the questions and conversations that open my heart more fully to him. It's the challenge to use my head and my heart together - to understand more fully who God calls me to be and how God calls us to be the church together.

As someone put it, faith in Christ makes us dual citizens. We live in this world where humans run our social structures, but we aren't limited by this world. To be a disciple; to be loyal to Jesus Christ above all else. To be a disciple is to be committed to the Kingdom of God.

Stewardship of our whole lives – not just our money, but our whole lives – is tied to what we believe about ourselves. If we are made in the image of God, and if we follow Jesus' advice to give God what belongs to God, then our lives must reflect that.

We're accountable to God for what we do have – not what we don't have. But how easy it is to compare ourselves with others. But Jesus doesn't say anything about

looking around at our neighbor. He simply says, “Give to God what is God’s.” “Give to God what is God’s.” A call for us to re-examine our lives in light of who we are – beloved children created in the image of God.

Lent is holy time - intentional time - to remember who we are and whose we are. It’s time to do what we need to do - find time and space - to open our hearts to God in prayer and service. It’s a time to be honest - and to be curious - and to be willing to walk with Jesus even when we find ourselves confused, knowing that he walks with us.

There’s a prayer that I’ve come to love, and part of it says, “May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.” May we live deep within our hearts this Lent.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

In this season, we’ll be invited to pray and reflect in worship, even writing some reflections if you feel led. As we seek to be honest with God, I ask us to consider two questions:

Do you ever feel confused by what Jesus says or does?

What prayers for clarity are on your heart today?

Sing “O Lord, Hear My Prayer” (FWS 2200)

Let us pray...PRAYERS of the PEOPLE