
Allegiance to Peace
Martin Grove United Church
October 22, 2017
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 and Matthew 22:15-22

Before I begin, I need to show you something, and I when you see what I'm going to show you I want you to yell out the first thing that comes to your mind. [show a coin and wait for responses]. Well, that's interesting. Not one of you yelled out "hypocrite"! So why on earth did Jesus call the pharisees "hypocrites" when all they did was show Jesus a coin? Our gospel story today is one of those stories where we feel like someone turned over 2 pages at once, or perhaps a translator skipped a piece of the story. Why did Jesus get so upset so fast when he saw a coin?

Well, in a sense, yes, part of the story is missing to our modern ears. The original audience would have understood the unwritten assumptions, but we have to add them in. To understand the meaning of this story, we need to remember who these people called "Pharisees" and "Herodians" were, because they are the ones interrogating Jesus. We also need to recall a few details about the Roman Empire.

The Roman Empire is fascinating. I'm no expert, but I do know that the Roman Empire wanted dominance. But the Empire was very strategic. Sometimes it was better (from Rome's point of view) to slaughter people and take over a piece of land. Sometimes it was better (from Rome's point of view) to form partnerships and work with the local inhabitants while extracting wealth and resources. If you don't kill the locals they can keep working, right?

And in Palestine, at the time of Jesus, Rome was trying to work with the locals without the need for a military conquest, and in fact they were quite accommodating to a number of social groups, including Jewish groups. One accommodation that Rome had made to Jewish groups was that Rome created special coins that - unlike the standard Roman denarius

[SLIDE of Roman denarius]

did not have an image of the Emperor on them, since Jewish law prohibited the use of

human images. Not only was the image itself offensive to Jewish sensitivities, but the words on the Roman coin said, “Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus.”

Meanwhile, while Rome was trying to extract wealth through partnerships with local groups, there were Jewish groups who were very nationalistic, who wanted to use military force to eject the Romans altogether. When these Jewish groups would rise up, then Rome would respond with military force and restore order. The revolt in 66 AD which resulted in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem is one example of that.

The “Pharisees” were one of these nationalistic groups, who wanted to create their own independent Jewish state. The Herodians - people who supported Herod - were Jewish people who were content to live in harmony with Rome, and who supported the idea of partnerships. So - Pharisees wanted to eject Rome and Herodians wanted to work with Rome. Pharisees and Herodians did not see eye-to-eye, except that both groups shared a fear and dislike of Jesus - the mysterious itinerant preacher who was gaining too much popularity for their comfort.

And both of these groups were present when Jesus was asked, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” If Jesus had simply said “Yes”, he would have annoyed one of the groups. If he had said “No”, he would have annoyed the other group. To quote Carl Olson of the Catholic World Report, “If Jesus had said Caesar’s tax was *unlawful* - that is, opposed to the Torah and Jewish beliefs - he would have been immediately charged with political insurrection against Roman rule. If he said the tax was *lawful*, he would have alienated and angered many of his followers and effectively destroyed his growing influence.”¹ The question to Jesus is really an offer for Jesus to commit political suicide and to irritate Jesus’s followers, regardless of which side they were on.

The Pharisees, who were not only nationalist but also religious zealots, should have followed their own rules, and only used the special Jewish coins. But the special coins had a more limited market, and were therefore less tradable and consequently less valuable. In the story, the Pharisees had no problem producing a real Roman denarius for Jesus to inspect, which is why Jesus called them hypocrites. And so the story is not so much about the question of paying taxes. The story is really about allegiance. Jesus was

¹ <http://www.catholicworldreport.com/2014/10/17/taxes-tricks-and-the-roman-coin/>

effectively being asked which group he belonged to - was a a hater of Rome or someone who wanted to support partnerships with Rome. But Jesus does not fit with either position. Jesus never gives the impression (in the entire New Testament, not just our short reading) that political or economic oppression was the biggest problem that Jewish people were facing anyway. Jesus doesn't preach about any of that, but instead speaks of something more important. The Pharisees wanted to put Jesus into a political box, but Jesus had beliefs that transcended the political box that his opponents were trying to force him into. Does that remind you of anybody else?

[show image of Colin Kaepernick - head shot]

[show image of Colin Kaepernick - full shot]

Kaepernick - as you probably know - used to be known as a good quarterback. But today, he is only known for not standing up when the national anthem was played before NFL football games. Kaepernick made it very clear that he was not standing for the anthem as a protest to the fact that people of colour are systematically discriminated against in the US, and in particular, as a response to the large number of unarmed black people killed by police in the US every year.

Kaepernick actually did this for a few games before anyone noticed - or cared - but when they did notice, our media exploded. Trump was famously quoted as saying, "I think it's a terrible thing, and you know, maybe he should find a country that works better for him", which was a bit ironic given how many of Trump's factories are in China. But Kaepernick's response was, "[Trump] always says, 'make America great again'. Well, America has never been great for people of colour. And that's something that needs to be addressed. Let's make America great for the first time."²

Since then the whole debate has only been about the nature of the protest that Kaepernick made. Is it disrespectful to the flag to not stand, etc. Should football player contracts be changed so that they are forced to stand, etc. Our media does not actually want any discussion about race - the message Kaepernick was trying to bring up.

To quote Wade Davis, a former professional football player, "The actual point of protest is to disrupt how we move about our daily lives. What Kaepernick did was

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uf0tli6FrTE>

disrupt one of our most treasured sports. Whether you agree with his tactics or not is one type of conversation. The larger conversation is what he is protesting about. The fact that so many [people] don't want to have that specific conversation speaks to the fact that they know what is happening in America is beyond tragic.”³

I think that Kaepernick and Jesus have the same problem. They both care about something very important. But they are both surrounded by people who care more about the way a message is presented than the message itself. Perhaps people like to focus on the way a message is presented to avoid dealing with the truth in the actual message. And both Jesus and Kaepernick give us difficult messages that we might rather ignore.

Speaking of which, today is World Peace Sunday. World Peace Sunday always sounds so cool. I mean, to imagine that since all people obviously want peace, that at some point, world peace will be achieved. But I'm not sure I believe any longer that all people want peace, because people seem to only want peace on their own terms. We all have our own allegiances that take priority over peace. We see this everywhere. We want peace - after someone else gives up their autonomy. We want peace - after that country becomes democratic. We want peace - after those heathens become Christian. We want peace - after you surrender your nuclear weapons, while we hold on to ours. Or in Quebec this week, we want peace, but only after you give up your religious traditions if you happen to be Muslim.

This happens on a personal level too. How often have you said that you will forgive someone - after they do something first. How often do we say that peace is important - but *in practice* we make peace secondary to other things. Spoiler alert - the whole world is doing that - and that's why we don't have world peace. Perhaps the only way to actually achieve world peace is to make our *first* allegiance to peace itself. When peace is secondary, well, you already see what we get.

I want to close with some words about World Peace from Jesus. Unfortunately, I couldn't find any. Today, when we say “World Peace” we mean an end to global conflict, and an end to the idea - which is always somewhere buried in our own minds - that for some time now we have had the military power to completely destroy all of humanity.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/sports/colin-kaepernick-nfl-protests.html>

Even if we go back just 100 years, it was probably during the First World War that humans started to imagine that war could potentially destroy all humanity. The technology to do that wasn't in place yet, but the nature of the conflict, and the reality of 1917 that war meant "total war" was the precursor. There is simply no way that Jesus - or anyone living 2000 years ago - could have shared our own fears of what global conflict gone wrong might look like.

So if I tried to preach now that Jesus wanted World Peace (in the way we understand the term today) I would be trying to stuff Jesus into a small political box, just like the pharisees did in our reading today. And I won't do that. Instead, I will offer that Jesus was very interested in peace - but a different kind of peace. Jesus didn't seem to care at all about the Romans. Jesus did not seem to feel that political or economic liberation mattered. Jesus wanted to share the peace of God and have people live lives not dominated by fear and its sibling, hatred. Jesus worked for inner personal peace, not political peace.

Jesus said, "My peace I give to you. My peace I leave with you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled. And do not let them be afraid."

Amen.

Let's "share the peace" with each other now. Greet the person beside you. One person can say "The peace of Christ be with you" and the other can respond "and also with you." Feel free to move around the sanctuary.