

WAYS AND MEANS

a sermon given by the Rev. Rosemary Lloyd
Sunday, October 26, 2008
at the First Church in Boston

When I was ordained, my mentor Roger Paine delivered the Charge to the Minister. He charged me to tell the truth, as nearly as I could, without spin.

You know what spin is—it's a technique of selectively presenting facts and quotes to support one's position—not taking the totality of the situation into consideration. It could be a way of using language or emphasis to shift the focus away from challenging issues, of easing away from having to take a stand that you know will meet opposition by your listeners.

In these last weeks of the longest presidential campaign ever, we all know more than we wish we did about "spin". We've been "spun" so much by both sides it's amazing that we can walk straight!

So when I read the text from Matthew that I chose for this morning, my first reaction was: Is Jesus spinning? As I thought about it, it seemed to me that a text that supplies such a well-known phrase—"render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's"—deserved some reflection in our context.

Here is the setup: After a couple of years of teaching in the country and seaside towns of Galilee, Jesus has moved to Jerusalem—the center of religious and political power in the region. His hopeful messages of inclusiveness, freedom from oppression and loving your neighbor have earned him devoted followers--disciples. He has also developed some powerful opponents. Remember, Jerusalem was an occupied territory under the Roman Empire, and the authorities used force to quell even talk of unrest.

In this story, among the crowd gathered to hear Jesus teach are Zealots—resident Jews impatient for change, ready even for armed revolt. And there are Herodians, agents for the Roman State (spies might not be too strong a term for them). Imagine a campaign rally in that setting... It's tough to spin effectively if you're trying to convince such opposing groups at the same time.

On the one hand are faithful Jews who believe there is but one God and that they should put no other gods before them. On the other hand are the Herodians who view the Emperor—Caesar—as the legitimate and sovereign ruler— who presents himself as a son of god.

Now, occupying a territory is expensive. To raise money for his armies, the Emperor imposed a tax on the populace which was to be paid in the coin of the realm, which happened to have Caesar's picture on one side, and Pax Romana on the other. Although the tax was being paid by the Jews, it was a subject for strong debate: was paying the tribute tax tantamount to acknowledging the Emperor as god, thus blasphemous?

It is in this context that the question is posed to Jesus: "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

If Jesus says, yes, pay the tax, the faithful would be angry and feel betrayed that their revolutionary leader would, in effect, acknowledge the Emperor as a god worthy of such tribute.

But if he says no! Do not pay the tax! It is wrong! In short order he would have been hauled away by soldiers and charged with treason.

So what does he say?

First he asks to be shown a tribute coin. (Apparently he doesn't have one on his person. Or maybe he does, but he wants to force his questioner to demonstrate that he carries and uses a coin with the idolatrous image and words...)

Whose head, whose image is on the coin? he asks. Why, it is Caesar's, they replied. Then Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." And the account concludes: When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

What was so amazing to this first century audience? With a few words, Jesus dismantles the limiting "either-or" parameters of the question. In a sentence, he shifted his listeners perspectives and understanding.

First, he distinguished that Caesar (the Emperor) and God are not the same. There is Caesar's stuff and God's stuff. Next, he juxtaposes their claims on the people. What needs to be given to Caesar? Only this coin which was already his—it has name and face on it. What needs to be given to God? That which belongs to God. Thus every Jew living in the first century knew the answer from the 24th Psalm—a text they would have been intimately familiar with: "The Earth is YHWH's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." (Ps. 24:1)

If everything is already God's, then what is left to be given to Caesar? The *denarius* coin is in the image of Caesar. Humans, however, are in the image of God. The coin? Give it to Caesar. The rest—including yourself—give to God.

So was Jesus spinning? He wasn't even shifting from foot to foot. He gave a direct and deft answer.

And while it may seem somewhat subtle to our 21st century ears—it is, upon reflection—a powerful, even subversive, commentary on how to meet the most difficult challenges of our lives. How? By knowing at the core of our being to whom or to what we belong. By knowing to what or to whom do we owe tribute with our money, our words, our hearts, our very lives.

The text I had originally chosen for this morning's sermon is from an article in the New York Times by Samuel G. Freedman ("On Religion,," Oct 4, A18):

"Several weeks ago, before the earth cracked open on Wall Street, Imam Khalid Latif had a chat with one of his regular worshipers at the Muslim center at New York University. This young man, a business student, had a theological complaint to register. Why did Islam make such a big deal about the principle of mutual benefit? What was the matter with just taking care of yourself?

About 10 days later, with the landscape marked by the bankruptcy, emergency sale and federal bailout of some of the nation's most venerable financial companies, a more abashed version of that same student returned. "Now I know why I can't define security by the number of zeroes on my paycheck," Imam Latif recalled the man saying.

Presented with the spiritual equivalent of what educators call a “teachable moment,” Imam Latif spoke to the student about the humility, perseverance and especially the Islamic concept of *sabr*, meaning “patience.” He offered a *hadith* from the Muslim tradition: “Patience comes at the first sign of calamity.”¹

Patience comes at the first sign of calamity...Not panic. Not fear. Not a shrinking into our selves—although I know this may be our instinct—an instinct we need to fight with all our will and faith.

From time to time it is important to state the obvious –because in a calamity we can forget the basics. You are not alone. You may be afraid to reach out, or embarrassed. But we are all affected by this. When we are fearful or anxious, our tendency can be to hide, to want to pull the covers over our heads. But that will only serve to isolate us in our fear. That is why I am so grateful for this community. Last night, at our all church potluck, we experienced the perfect antidote to the daily news. It was a beautiful manifestation of community sharing together. Thanks to all—especially the good folks on the Membership Committee who pulled it together.

Similarly, last week, we had a very touching acknowledgement of long time member, Helen Savage, who is moving to California tomorrow. You all pitched in, you showed up, you celebrated Helen and her contributions to our life together. I hope you take the same encouragement and inspiration that I do from these simple, beautiful acts of community.

I’m not saying the causes of fear don’t exist. Some of us have lost our jobs. Lots of us have lost our investments. Some are in danger of losing homes. Many have lost a sense of trust in our institutions.

But we are not our homes, our investments, our money, or even our jobs. We belong to something more. What or who that something is, we each have to touch deep in our beings—with all our hearts, all our minds, all our strength. And know it.

Even if you don’t wear glasses, you have a lens through which you look and see the world. That lens is cut and polished from a lifetime of experience, culture, class, race, gender identity, and religion. It shapes our perspective.

But there are things that can transform that lens, that can have us take a new look at the same thing. And what or how we see—in this new light—can amaze us.

Listen: “*The earth is God’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.*”

What might shift internally if this song was true for you? Perhaps you could hear it echo better through the words of our UU 7th principle: We affirm—we state strongly as fact—our respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Interdependent. What affects one affects us all...We’re in this together. You are not alone.

I don’t think this is spin. It’s convergence. And as we grasp it, understanding will the dawn as we, like the Islamic student, apprehend the truth and rightness of the fundamental principle of mutual responsibility. If we can glimpse it with our hearts—it’s pretty tough to get with just your mind—we can gain access to a new kind of hope and humility, patience and perseverance in a time of calamity....

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/04/us/04religion.html>

It is the truth of this possibility that gives me the audacity to suggest that what is happening right now is not solely a calamity. Why would I say such a thing? Because the events of the past few weeks have brought us to the edge of our deepest insecurities. It is perhaps only from this uncomfortable vantage point that we can see something that has been largely theoretical—a vaunted idea that lacked meaningful application. That is: we belong to one another.

In times of crisis or calamity, we sink into a posture of separateness at our peril. To our personal detriment and to the harm of our community.

From time to time, we may have made the error of thinking it will only be “others” who need the services and safety nets provided by the government. Not us. We don’t need welfare. Or agencies that provide food and emergency shelter and health care.

But guess what? There is no separation. There is no isolating “me” from “we.” We are “us.” We are the others.

The gospel text we heard this morning has been used for something called “proof-texting.” That is, taking a text from the bible and spinning it to demonstrate the rightness of a position. In this case, it’s been used both to support the rightness of paying taxes and the rightness of not paying taxes to a government viewed as illegitimate or unjust.

In my view, that’s not the proper use of a Biblical text. The text is not an authority on whether to pay taxes or not.

But then, I guess I have my own spin. However, it comes with the disclaimer that I am attempting to tell the truth as best as I can. I believe I know to whom and to what I belong and that I am speaking out of that core.

Believing that we are in this together—all the earth and all who live in it—I can only conclude there is an inescapable requirement on us to affirm and demonstrate our mutual responsibility. I understand part of that responsibility to pay taxes—insofar as taxes are the system democratically designed within government to allow us to do together what we cannot – possibly - do - alone: To care for children and elders, for the poor and the blind and the mentally challenged. To educate and heal and protect. To foster beauty through the arts and preserve our natural environment. And, in a dire situation, to rebuild the economy.

Repeatedly in the Christian Bible, Jesus is quoted as urging his disciples: do not be anxious or afraid.

But how do we do that? Some think we should believe that everything will be OK in the end. I think that would only set us up for disappointment. Because sometimes, everything is not OK. At least for a time.

What really helps us be not anxious or afraid is believing that—even if everything is not OK—we will have the ways and the means to face reality and still live with our humanity intact. Not contracted in fear but expansive with love. This is called having hope.

If you take no other word with you this morning, please take this one: Hope.

My Hope comes from knowing—at the core of my being—that we belong to an Infinite Source of Love that is beyond my intellectual understanding. It comes from knowing that in the midst of crisis, we are supported by that Love.

I know am not my money. But I also know that my money can be an expression of my Hope and a tribute to the Source of that Hope, which I call God.

That is why, on November 4th, I will be voting for the Common Wealth of the people of Massachusetts and will vote No on Question One—the ballot initiative that proposes to eliminate state income taxes. I believe, with Oliver Wendell Holmes, that taxes are “the price we pay for civilization”—for the sheer integrity of the fabric of our society.

I pay taxes because it is required of me by statute, but also because it is required of me by my faith and the Source of my hope. And I want to have a new perspective on paying taxes. So next quarter, when we make our income tax payment, I promise to send the money that feels so scarce right now as an expression of solidarity with the world and all who live in it.

I don't know that it will make any difference to the world, but I know that internally, if I can make the act of paying taxes a blessing, it will make a difference to my state of heart. Instead of feeling frightened, or anxious, worried that there won't be enough money for me and my needs, I think I will feel generous, helpful, loyal and loving. That would be kind of amazing.

It shifts. It's elusive. I'm certainly not happy about the current state of my 401K. But like the stocks that are seeking their real value, my spirit is rising with the certain knowledge that I belong to something larger than myself.

The Qur'an gently reproves us—corrects us to remember that we are more than our fear and our anxiety in times of calamity. It is written:

To spend of your substance, out of love for God. For your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; To be steadfast in prayer And give in charity; To fulfill the contracts which you have made; And to be firm and patient, in pain and adversity And throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth.... Qur'an 2:177

May it be so. For all the world and those who live in it. AMEN.