

After Idolatry

Exodus 33: 7-23; Matthew 22: 15-22

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Baptist prophet Carlyle Marney used to say that he always thought that his father had a faith in God that was unshakeable. But one time, toward the end of his father's life, he asked him, "Daddy, have you ever had trouble with your faith?" His father said, "Son, there have been many times my faith has been shot through with holes. I couldn't believe." Marney said, "So when was your faith restored." His father replied, "When I could get to the meeting."

When I could get to the meeting. I don't know about you but often that is how it is with me. Sometimes, during the week, I'm worn down and burned out, until I can get to the meeting. Sometimes, I am in despair and discouraged, until I can get to the meeting. Sometime, other gods demand my allegiance, until I can get to the meeting.

Our Old Testament story today is about Moses getting to the meeting. Outside of the camp of the people of Israel, as they travel across the wilderness toward the Promised Land, Moses puts up the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting. It is the place where Moses goes to meet with God when they are in camp. During travel, God leads Moses and the people as a cloud or pillar of smoke in the daytime, and at night God leads as a pillar of fire. But when they are in camp, Moses puts up the Tent of Meeting. The tent where he can meet God.

Since way back in Exodus 19, the people have been camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai while Moses went up on the mountain to meet with God and receive the Ten Commandments. You remember from last week what happened. Moses was gone a long time; he had probably been gone about six weeks, and the people grew afraid and restless. They became impatient and wanted a god who would meet their own needs, so they took a lot of their gold jewelry and melted it down and cast a golden calf. Then they had this big worship service around the golden calf. God was angry and Moses was angry because God was betrayed. So people perished, people died, which is what idolatry will do to you. You worship gods who have no power or the wrong power and you end up dying because they will lead you toward death and then they can't save you.

Today, we pick up the story after idolatry. After betrayal, after trust has been broken. There is a lot of pain and hurt in this story today. A lot. God and Moses and the people of Israel are in a profound three-way relationship. A deep three-way friendship. God has been working at creating and calling these people forth all of the way back to Abraham and Sarah. God heard these people cry as they suffered under the oppressive and violent rule of Pharaoh in Egypt. Only four months ago God led them out of Egypt, across the Red Sea and through the desert, feeding them all along the way. They were God's people and God was the One they followed and worshiped. Until the idolatry. Now everything is in shambles. Some have died. No one knows what to do. How do you go on after idolatry? How do you go on after betrayal?

So Moses goes to the meeting. He goes to the Tent of Meeting. And God tells Moses that he and the people should go on to the Promised Land and God will

go ahead of them and deliver the land for them but God will not go with them. They are to travel on their own. God says, “I will not go with you because you are a stiff-necked people and if I go with you I will consume you!”

This conversation we are privileged to overhear is an extraordinary exchange between intimate friends. Indeed, the relationship between God and the people of Israel is more like a lover’s quarrel than anything else. Moses is both prophet and priest – prophet in that he tells the people the Word and Way of God, and priest in that he goes and speaks to God on behalf of the people. So Moses finds himself in the pain-filled position of knowing and loving God and knowing and loving the people and knowing that the people have just betrayed God. In this intimate, honest conversation God says that they will have to go on without him. Moses feels like he is out on a limb and God is leaving him there. He is frantic. There is a bit of panic in this exchange. There is hurt and pain but there is panic, too. “God, I’ve stuck my neck out pretty far, and you’re leaving me here high and dry! Please, don’t leave us.”

Anyone of us who accepts the call of God find themselves here at one time or another. Anyone of us who has heard God call us to baptism, to ministry, to service, to marriage, to parenting, to a vocation of one sort or another where we put ourselves on the line, comes to the place where we are stretched very thin. Idolatry and betrayal is on one side of us and God is on the other and we discover we are more on our own than we thought. We can’t do this by ourselves. We stuck our necks out and now we fear we stuck them out too far. We have gone beyond our own competence; our skills and talents and good smarts won’t carry us through anymore. We need God!

Moses knows that because of the people's idolatry they are in a major catastrophe. They forsook God and the result was horrible. Many, many people ended up dying. Now, in grief, in pain, and desperate, Moses is pleading for God not to leave them alone.

After idolatry there is plenty of tragedy to go around. The people's lives are in pieces because of their idolatry. Their relationship with God is in tatters because of their idolatry.

Eventually in this deep, intimate conversation, God changes God's mind and says I'll go with you. But first there must be a long time of prayer and preparation. We're not going on like nothing ever happened. Things have changed after idolatry.

Now, let's look at the New Testament lesson given to us this morning. Matthew records this conversation between Jesus and the religious leaders who are trying to entrap him. Pharisees and Herodians join forces and ask Jesus is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. Now part of what makes this question interesting is that the Pharisees and the Herodians hate each other. They are rivals in the Jewish religion with two different ways of worshiping God and practicing their faith. Politically, they are on opposite sides: the Pharisees hated Caesar and anyone who worked for Caesar, especially Caesar's lackey, King Herod. Of course, by their very name, the Herodians, you can understand they support King Herod. So even though they oppose each other, when it comes to Jesus, they become united.

They are trying to get Jesus in trouble when they ask if it is lawful to pay

taxes to Caesar. If Jesus said that yes, it was lawful, then the people, among whom Jesus is very popular, will turn against Jesus because they hate Caesar and they hate paying taxes to Caesar. On the other hand, if Jesus says that no, you shouldn't pay taxes to Caesar, then these leaders will make a bee-line to the Romans and report him as a trader, a seditionist who is plotting the overthrow of the Imperial government (which is, by the way, what happens anyway).

Jesus answers by asking for a coin. Do you find it interesting that Jesus has to ask for a coin? He doesn't have one. He asks them, "Whose picture is stamped on this coin?" They say, "Caesar." Jesus replies, "Well, give to Caesar what is his and give to God what is God's." And the religious leaders walk away shaking their heads, Jesus has once again out-foxed them.

But for many of us, Jesus has us shaking our heads as well. What did he mean? What muddies the waters even more, is that we read so much into these words. We are looking for clear instruction from Jesus here and he doesn't give us very much.

For example, it is common for us to hear Jesus saying, "Give unto Caesar that which is his and give unto God that which is his," as a statement on the separation of Church and State. Only in the most indirect way is this a statement on church and state. It sounds like Jesus is saying that we should balance church and state, God and Caesar; sort of 50/50, half and half kind of approach.

This is not a statement about the separation of church and state, which has to do with political involvement by the church in the affairs of state, and religious involvement by the state in the affairs of the church. Church/State separation is a constitutional issue and is only in the most indirect way related to what Jesus is talking about here.

No, Jesus is talking about lordship. Whom do you worship? Who receives our allegiance? I think it is obvious that Jesus does have room for some kind of allegiance to old Caesar, some kind of loyalty to the state. But what kind? How do we decide?

Remember, that God creates or calls some institutions, or what the Apostle Paul calls principalities and powers, to bring order to God's good creation. For example, the state is to provide order, safety, organization to humanity. We need traffic signs and laws and we need ways to keep things working so we can go on with our everyday living; we need certain things no matter who we are and where we are. But these principalities and powers, these institutions, these corporate aggregations of power and dominance in politics, education, economics, religion, health, law, and so on and so on fall from God's grace just like humans do. They sin. They become twisted and abusive; skewed from what God originally intended. And in their sin, they yearn for the place and power of God. The principalities and powers want what belongs to God alone. They want our allegiance.

In their proper place, there is nothing wrong with some of our allegiance. But the key words are "in their proper place" and "some of our allegiance." They have usurped their proper place and they want all of our allegiance. In our baptism in Christ Jesus, we declare that our allegiance is to God in Christ, and we start learning how to put these principalities and powers – in this instance, the state – back in their proper place in service to the God we know in Jesus and we put ourselves in our proper place in service to the God we know in Jesus. And as long as we can go about our calling, living our lives as Christians without the state interfering then that is good. We can freely give old Caesar our limited allegiance. But when Caesar starts demanding that which belongs to God, then we have to say, "Whoa! Caesar. You're stepping outside your boundaries."

In Acts 4, Peter and John are called in before the ruling authorities and ordered to cease and desist from what they were doing (they were preaching and

healing without a license). Peter and John respond, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must decide; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4: 19-20). Peter and John know they must serve God first and foremost.

All of this fine and dandy until you start asking more specifically, “How do we know what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God?” Who decides? Because Caesar is the one who wants to answer that question for us and when Caesar decides what belongs to whom, we’re in trouble.

A couple of years ago while I was at one speaking engagement or another, I got into a conversation with a fellow about this very thing. This fellow, a Christian and active member of a church, said, “Well, it says give to Caesar that which belongs to him and to God that which belongs to him.” I said, “That’s right. But you tell me who decides what belongs to whom and I’ll tell you who your Lord is.” He got red in the face with me and said, “Well, all I know is that you give to God what is God’s but when your country calls, you have to go. All of this is fine until your country calls.” I said, “Well you just answered your own question and made my point for me. You just told me who you worship. Ultimately, you believe your country has final say over what you do and that means, that is who your Lord is.”

Do you hear what I’m saying? I am not saying there is no proper place for patriotism and loyalty to your country. But I am saying that the Lordship of Jesus Christ limits what that loyalty is and how that patriotism is to look. The Lordship of Jesus Christ tells us what is proper and what is improper in our civic duties. If the roles are reversed, if your country tells you how you are to worship God and how you are to live your Christian life, then you are making your country the Lord

of your life and that is called idolatry. Read back in Exodus 32 and you will see that idolatry results in destruction, death, and tragedy.

Roman Catholic priest, Father George Zabelka, was an Army chaplain in 1945 in the Pacific, when he blessed the pilot, crew, and plane that flew off to drop the second atomic bomb on Japan. Father Zabelka blessed and served the Eucharist to the Catholic crew of the plane. The plane flew to Nagasaki, which was the largest and first Catholic city in Japan. Their aiming point to drop the bomb was the steeple of the Roman Catholic cathedral and school in the city. The bomb destroyed three orders of Catholic nuns, and wiped out the Catholic cathedral and school and all of the children.

In 1980, looking back Father Zabelka said, “One would have thought that I, as a Catholic priest, would have spoken out against the atomic bombing of nuns. One would have thought that I would have suggested that as a minimal standard of Catholic morality, Catholics shouldn’t bomb Catholic children. I didn’t. . . . I was told it was necessary.” (from an interview in *Sojourners*, Sept. 1980, pp, 12-15.)

God have mercy on us when we let Caesar tell us what is necessary and what is not. And you may be sitting there thinking that we had to drop the bomb on Nagasaki; you may be saying, “But it was necessary.” I don’t have the time to get in a debate over the military and strategic issues in the closing days of WWII. I do have to say that you should at least be deeply troubled because this was nothing more than idolatry. We let Caesar set the ground rules and Christ was betrayed. Therefore we should know something of the anguish of Moses in the Tent of Meeting. We have seen idolatry and we know what it can do. And we desperately need God. We need to get to the meeting.

T. S. Eliot wrote these words set in the famous English church, Little Gidding:

*. . . You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to  
kneel . . .*

Here in the meeting, let us kneel before God. Praying, “God have mercy on us, sinners. Please don’t leave us to ourselves. God stay with us, redeem us. Save us.”

Amen.