

Psalm 77:1-12 ~ Matthew 22:15-22

We Live by Gift

20th Sunday after Pentecost ~ October 18, 2020

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Second Scripture Reading:

In our first lesson, Psalm 77, we were heard a cry that was real and raw. This Psalm opens a window on a person's emotional and spiritual struggle as they are hovering over the open pit of utter despair. A person of faith crying aloud to God, being honest enough to say "I'm getting nothing back here, where are you, God?" They dare to ask the unaskable questions for a person of faith: "Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious?" Perhaps, some of us, if we are honest, may also be asking these questions as our COVID numbers continue their alarming rise here in Wisconsin, and the divisive politics in the run up to election day keep intensifying. Would anybody else like to just have this election tomorrow, if we could?

With all the crazy going on around us as a nation; as well as all the personal troubles ruminating around inside of us that are magnified by seven months of being confined and constricted: sleeping well is becoming a rare gift. Like the psalmist, we may feel like our old, sure ways of practicing our religion, and our old sure ways of practicing our democracy are coming dangerously close to unraveling. And so, we worry, we panic, we obsess: what is going to happen next, how is any of this going to get better, and what can we possibly do about it, anyway?

Good news: Our gospel lesson offers us just the insight and hope that we seek! We are still with Jesus in the temple on Monday of his last week, with the shadow of the cross looming ever closer. Today is Round 4 of the Jesus smackdown series Matthew's narrative provides. Jesus is taking off the gloves now, after three parables, he's got another trick up his sleeve. Spoiler alert: like the Green Bay Packers win-loss record this season, wait maybe I should just say "Win" record, being 4 and 0, (Go Pack Go), this story will make Jesus' record match the Packers at 4 and 0 against his adversaries who are clearly plotting to entrap him in his own words at this point in the story. They came up with an air tight "gotcha" type question and were circling in for the take down. But Jesus turns the question and the mood from entrapment to amazement with a coin trick that exposed the lie and opened up the truth that can set us all free.

Sermon:

Can you imagine the Packers and the Vikings teaming up to play the Bears? Or imagine Mitch McConnell and Chuck Schumer plotting *together* on how to block a supreme court nominee? That's about how unlikely and strange it was for the Herodians and the Pharisees to be on the same side in their opposition to Jesus. The Herodians, were pro-Rome and the Roman Empire, and the Pharisees were scrupulous observers of the Jewish law who resented their Roman occupiers. Well, they both had their reasons for seeing Jesus and his rising power and popularity as a threat. So, they concocted a question for which there was no good answer: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" No matter which way he answered the question, he would alienate one side or the other, his fate would be doomed and one side would be ready to undo him.

But instead, we are told that they went away amazed and shocked. I'm thinking how badly we could all do with a little of that. Where people at odds, people divided, people throwing verbal punches or worse, go away amazed and dumbfounded. How did he do that? Jesus did not play their game. He was aware of their intention behind the question and spoke to the core of the controversy. In doing so, he not only avoided entrapment. His answer revealed the truth that could set all of them free.

Faced with this trap question, Jesus didn't do what our politicians often do today, which is to answer a different question, the one that he wished they had asked. Instead he turned the tables on them and trapped them in their own question. "Reach into your pocket and take out a coin" he answered, "and now show it to me. Whose face do you see? And whose inscription?" They did so. The coin they showed him was a denarius—a coin issued by Emperor Tiberius and that was used for paying taxes. Here in Marshfield, Wisconsin in 2020, we may not realize what this signified.

What they knew there in the temple that day, but we wouldn't unless we studied up on this text, was that on the "heads side" of the coin was a portrait of Tiberius along with the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus." As in, "King Tiberius, son of God." And on the "tails side" of the coin was the image of a woman depicting peace with the words "high priest" referring to the emperor as the high priest of the empire. So right there in their very pockets in the temple where the holy law was to worship only God in truth and in Spirit—they had a coin with a graven image and inscription of an authority claiming to be the son of God and claiming to be the high priest. Right in their own hands they were blithely holding a graven image of a false god with a statement of faith that ran counter to the faith of Israel. Their law breaking was immediately and undeniably exposed by that shiny coin they quickly and easily produced when asked. Their hypocrisy revealed, Jesus completed his message saying, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and give to God the things that are God's."ⁱ

I want to be clear here, He was not setting up a binary world where some things are the emperor's and another separate set of things are God's. Nor did he give religious people a pass on the things of this world. He was teaching them and us how our religion and our politics cannot be separated if we are seeking to follow God's law. In this short, pithy statement he was bursting their bubble and ours of either/or; us/them, religion/politics binary world view. Everything belongs to God. Whatever is the emperor's, is a subset within God's realm. They were all complicit, and so are we.

The truth is, we all live in one kind of bubble or another. When it comes to protecting sports teams from catching the coronavirus, bubbles are a good thing. But otherwise, if our bubble remains unbroken, it becomes a source of division, hatred, and even toxic violence. On Thursday, our Open Book Group discussed a remarkable book titled, *Rising out of Hatred: The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist*, by Eli Saslow. It tells the true story of Derek Black who grew up in an extreme bubble at the epicenter of white nationalism. His father, Don Black founded Stormfront, the largest racist community on the internet, and his godfather, David

Duke, was a KKK grand wizard. As the book title indicates, Derek experienced a slow, yet amazing transformation from this world, where he was destined to take over his family's legacy. It's hard pinpoint the start of such a transformation, but one major inflection point was his choice to attend Florida New College in Sarasota, Florida. He began to break out of his bubble when he befriended Juan, an immigrant from Peru and then Matthew Stevenson, the only Orthodox Jew on campus. He also met a girl named Rose who was also Jewish.ⁱⁱ

It was his friend, Matthew who was a convert to Judaism after being baptized Presbyterian who invited him over one Friday night. Where did he get that courage to reach out beyond his bubble? Well his father had told him once, "Reach out and extend the hand, no matter who's waiting on the other side," and so that that afternoon in September, Matthew wrote to Derek, "Looking forward to seeing you tonight." Here is how Eli Saslow tells it,

The Shabbat group that night was smaller than normal. Only Moshe and Derek's friend Juan came over to Matthew's apartment and waited for Derek to arrive. Already they all had relationships with Derek, but still they had been studying him in some ways listening to his radio show, and reading over his Stormfront posts to answer the questions echoing in their heads. Juan wanted to know: If Derek believe in racial purity, what did he make of someone like Juan, whose ancestry was part European, part indigenous, and part black? Moshe wondered: The Holocaust that his grandfather narrowly survived in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp—did Derek and other white nationalists believe it never happened?

They waited around a small kitchen table and made jokes about how their Friday night deserved its own reality show tease line: "Watch two Jews and an immigrant befriend a white supremacist!" But in truth they all felt comfortable spending time with Derek in part because of their minority status. There was less risk that classmates would accuse them of sympathizing with Derek's beliefs or condoning his behavior.ⁱⁱⁱ And so that night they just talked together, not raising the big issues, yet. That took a long time and many, many Shabbat night conversations.

As we used to say when we gave a 4th grade book report, "you have to read the rest of the book yourself." And I highly recommend that you do! I will give you one more quote from Derek Black when he finally came out and explained to his family, his tribe, how his mind had changed, "It is an advocacy I cannot support, having grown past my bubble, talked to the people I affected, read more widely; and realized the impact my actions had on people I never wanted to harm. I am sorry for the damage done by my actions."^{iv}Derek, now Roland Black, was no longer entrapped by the toxic ideology on which he had been raised and nurtured. Something he believed with all his heart. Until his heart was opened.

It began with courageous conversations. I think this is what Jesus is calling us to do, now. To take a breath, look up, see that all of us are God's, and so there is hope for healing our divides. There is a new program called, "*One Small Step: Courageous Conversations Across A Growing Divide*," based on the idea that intentional conversations between partisans could be a catalyst for national healing. I am just learning about it. Participants talk, listen, and get to know each other for 40 minutes, not to change each other's minds, but to respect each other as

people. The effort is based on a theory of psychology known as the “contact hypothesis”, which suggests that contact between people of different backgrounds, under certain conditions, can melt away conflict.^v I believe we can find the root of this hypothesis in our divine law. It takes time and attention, with intention and divine love. The story of Derek Black’s transformation is true and beautiful example that gives me hope.

We have a chance today at FPC to have a courageous conversation together by Zoom at 11:00 am. After four classes this past summer on systemic racism, this will be our chance to “talk among ourselves” about our experiences around this difficult and important topic. I have full confidence that we can do this with respect and integrity, because of our faith in Christ who calls us to see beyond our bubbles, the divine image in every one of us.

The choice is ours. Do we live by gift or by grasp? If we live for ourselves in our own bubble, we live by grasp, by groping for more and griping when we don’t get it. If we live by grasp, we are always trapped. If we live for God, we live by gift and are freed to live by grace. Sheer grace. Not tomorrow, not some day when we get our act together. Not on November 4th. But right now. Yes, right here in the heat of the Temple when the pressure is up. Right now, in the runup to the most divisive election of our time. Right now, in the seventh month of this pandemic here in Wisconsin where our test positivity has climbed to the point where it is gaining national attention. Right now, when hunger is on the rise in our country. Right now, when children are still separated from their parents by our government at the Southern border.

We can choose to live by gift. We can break free from the evils of these traps, these bubbles that test and try us. These traps are tempting in the midst of all we are facing: We can choose to opt out, circle the wagons, just watch out for me and mine, and don’t give an inch to anyone. Not even the person whose driving you don’t like. Or Face Book post that angers you. Or Tweet that raises your blood pressure. Again.

We could do that if we didn’t believe that every day, every breath we draw, is a gift from God. Not to be taken for granted, but rather given in love for God and neighbor. We could do that if we weren’t created in God’s image. In keeping with Jesus’ coin trick: I will put it like this. We may have coins (or cards, or Apple Pay) in our pockets that we use to conduct our daily business. But those are small potatoes compared to this larger truth: that you and every person is one of God’s coins. God did not coin us, create us, shape and form us to be God’s buried or trapped treasure. God did not become Jesus and suffer and die for us so we could keep trapping and trolling and trashing each other.

God coined us so that God could use us in the fight to unify and heal what is divided and broken. God coined us not so that we would just go along to get along and be silent in the face of evil. God coined us to speak the truth in love. God coined us and calls us to make the turn our insomniac Psalmist makes, the turn from the grasping I, me, mine framework, into You, Thou, God: the mystery of our tiny, humble place in God’s kingdom. Our position in God’s realm where there is equity, where we can fight for peace and for justice with all our might and muster.

When we take a breath and look up and out beyond our immediate crisis, we remember that this isn't our first inflection point. Our country has been through other equally trying, difficult times. One of those was in 1930, when Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote the hymn, "God of Grace and God of Glory." Rev. Fosdick served as a chaplain during World War I and then as a Presbyterian pastor in New York City when he was called to pastor a new church, intentionally interdenominational, on the edge of Harlem that came to be called The Riverside Church. The hour they were facing in 1930 when he wrote this hymn for the dedication of Riverside Church, was in the depths of the Great Depression, the economic disaster that drained our nation of life and hope between the two World Wars.

"Save us from weak resignation" is an important part of this hymn prayer. "Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore." We are always tempted to believe that the evils that we face far outstrip our resources to deal with them. We are tempted to retreat into a safe place, hold our breath, and wait for the storm to blow over.^{vi} But, my friends we know that evil unopposed doesn't blow over. It takes the sacrifices of dedicated persons to build a better world. It takes courageous conversations. It takes engaging in our civic duties to heal divisions and to right the wrongs that go against God's kingdom of love and justice. That's why God coined us, and redeemed us through Christ. This is the invitation that I hear today. It takes all of us.

ⁱ Rolf Jacobson, "Trap Question," October 18, 2020, in [workingpreacher.org](https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5458), see <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5458>.

ⁱⁱ This summary taken largely from Janet Wolfe's Open Book Group outline for October 15, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eli Saslow, *Rising Out of Hatred: The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist*, (Anchor Books, Random House, New York, NY, 2018), pp. 78-80.

^{iv} *Ibid*, p. 219.

^v <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/13/912725672/courageous-conversations-across-a-growing-divide-one-small-step>.

^{vi} See [Barryshymns.blogspot.com/2019/05/god-of-grace-and-god-of-glry.html](https://barryshymns.blogspot.com/2019/05/god-of-grace-and-god-of-glry.html).