Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“Does your teacher pay the temple tax?” (Matt 17:23).

The composition of the Gospels has some similarity to one of Jesus’ parables about fishing with a dragnet (Matt 13:47-52). The evangelists pulled together the many sayings and stories of Jesus from the oral and preaching traditions and organized them within their narratives to convey who Jesus was and what he had taught. These compositions were structured with theological purpose and literary skill to form readers in the faith and to inspire them to enter the mystery of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection as a living process of transformation.

There were undoubtedly many traditions and ideas that were left out of the Gospels, which were edited over several generations to serve the liturgical and catechetical needs of the faith communities that used them, both remembering Jesus and applying his teachings to their contemporary challenges. We know that some stories about Jesus’ childhood were excluded, and that a number of Gospels attributed to different apostles did not survive to be part of the official canon.

Today’s Gospel passage combines two apparently different themes. One is Jesus’ predictions of his betrayal and death in Jerusalem, and the other is a curious story about whether Jesus paid taxes that ends with a miracle when Peter is instructed to catch a fish that has a coin in its mouth to pay the tax. Why these two stories were joined by Matthew requires some creative exegesis with uncertain results.

One suggestion is that in other predictions of Jesus’ passion, it is Peter who objects and is rebuked by Jesus for thinking only in human terms. The campaign against

Jesus that will lead to his death includes efforts to discredit him for not paying taxes. The most serious example involved Roman taxes, when his enemies tried to trap Jesus with the question, “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar? (Matt 22: 15-22). If Jesus had said no, it would have gotten him into big trouble.

In today’s account, Peter is eager to protect Jesus and tells critics that Jesus does pay the temple tax. Jesus may not have, and he justifies this by arguing that only foreigners, not subjects, were required to pay. In the end, the tax is paid with the coin from the fish’s mouth. If this fish story was in Matthew’s dragnet of sayings, he uses it here to resolve the ongoing question whether Jesus was a lawbreaker and disloyal to the temple. Peter, the fisherman leader of the early church, is reminded of another miraculous story also used to describe Jesus’ death and resurrection -- Jonah’s delivery by the mouth of a fish to his destination.

We are reminded of the imaginative power of the Word to form us in the mystery of Christ. To follow Jesus is to share in his sufferings. These include the ambiguities of law and spirit, the many invitations to negotiate the borders of legality and love to stand with the accused and the rejected as Jesus did. Peter tried to spare Jesus from suffering, but then surrendered his life to follow him to the cross. Formed by the Word of God, may we dare to do the same.

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