Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“The LORD, your God, shall you fear, and him shall you serve” (Deuteronomy 10:20).

Deut 10:12-22; Matt 17:22-27

Right before the Israelites crossed the Jordan into Canaan, Moses presented them with the code of conduct they were to observe as God’s People. Unlike their experience of oppression and exploitation in Egypt under the pharaoh, they were to base their treatment of each other by remembering God’s gracious treatment of them. As God had shown compassion, they were to be compassionate and just, even with foreigners and alien residents. Their social and economic life was to be governed by fairness and concern for the poor, the orphan and the widow.

These ideals had deteriorated notably by the time of Jesus. Wealthy upper classes, priestly families and temple clergy accommodated royal corruption and taxation under the Roman occupation, while peasants survived on the land and the streets of Jerusalem were filled with beggars. The temple treasury, enriched by fees for animal sacrifice and other rituals, money changing and donations, was a cash box dipped into by competing interests, criminal and official.

In today’s Gospel, agents of the temple treasury probed Peter to find out if Jesus had paid his taxes. Peter, alert to possible trouble, begged off by assuring them that, of course, Jesus paid taxes. Jesus, it appears from his comments comparing tax exempt citizens to foreigners, had not paid the temple tax, but to cover for Peter and to satisfy the temple agents in search of cause to report him, he instructed Peter to miraculously find the needed coin in the mouth of the next fish he caught. Better to pay up than to take the bait.

The scheme may be a fish story, but it reveals Matthew’s sensitivity to later critics who said Jesus was a lawbreaker. Like another story about discerning payment of taxes to Caesar, this little story proved useful to tax resistors like Seattle’s Archbishop Hunthausen, who withheld payment for war spending, in particular for the Trident submarines in Puget Sound armed with nuclear weapons. This is worth noting on the 76th anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki. But the pharaoh’s reach was long, and the archbishop’s witness was alarming enough to get Washinton to pressure Rome to send an inquisitor to quietly undermine his official authority.

The Word probes our integrity at every turn. How easy it is to accommodate rather than resist, to blur our compromises rather than sharpen our consciences. A disciple is accountable to the codes of justice and love, especially when they are so obvious. Treat others as God has treated you.

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