

“RISKING CHALLENGE”

The Rev. Victor Kim

Matthew 22:15-22

(03-07-21) Lent 3

I want to thank Dr. Richard Topping for sharing a short reflection on risk this morning, risk in what he sees as he looks through that rather large camera lens and risk in his own context as a teacher and preacher. Over the course of this pandemic, Richard has shared many of his photographs of birds online and he has attracted his share of admirers, including myself. It may be that Richard is lining up a new career for when he decides to retire from teaching, but I think I speak for many when I say that I hope that day won't come for many more years.

Richard speaks of the risks that face teachers and preachers, besides those that face birds, but no matter how much a student or parishioner may have disagreed or even have been offended by something he may have preached or taught, Richard probably never had to fear for his life in response, just a nasty comment or two in the guest book! I mean there's a reasonable limit to our risk in this 21st century western context, isn't there? Think about it, how many people would go into ministry or teaching if every lecture or worship service was an occasion to fear for one's life!

But for Jesus, teaching in the Temple in those last days before his arrest and crucifixion, the act of teaching, and more specifically, what he was teaching, indeed put his life at risk, and as we all know, led to his eventual death. Professor A. J. Levine, another teacher, whose book, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, we are using as a guide this Lent, says that Jesus' courage in teaching in the Temple is extraordinary. He risks not only being misunderstood but arrested. And in the audience, there are some who want to trip him up with catch-22 type questions and others who try to goad him into saying something controversial.¹

Jesus has entered into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey to a chorus of hosannas. The entire city was in turmoil wondering who he was. Then he proceeded to drive out those selling animals for sacrifice and overturned the tables of the moneychangers, causing chaos and commotion, accusing the people of turning the Temple into a den of robbers. In doing these things, Jesus caught the attention of the chief priests and the scribes, who were afraid of him and sought a way to kill him.

One of the ways to get rid of Jesus would be to get him to say something that would be seditious against the Romans who ruled Judea at that time. The Romans were always on the lookout for would be messiahs, trouble makers, rabble rousers, those who would foment rebellion against their rule. And they were ruthless in dealing with such people.

¹ A. J. Levine, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, p.66

If the authorities could just get Jesus to say something that would anger the Romans, well then, problem solved! And so, they laid a trap.

Now it doesn't matter what century you live in, there are two constants in life, death and taxes and I'm pretty sure that there are some people who would prefer death to paying more than what they believe is their fair share in taxes. It's made all the worse in Jesus' context because the taxes are being extracted by the Romans, the occupiers. But get Jesus to say something about not paying taxes, then bingo, you can report him to the Romans, and they will take care of the rest.

It's interesting who lays the trap for Jesus. Two divergent groups of Jews, Pharisees and Herodians, two groups who wouldn't ordinarily be caught dead within earshot of one another, converge on Jesus to trap him with a trick question about taxes. The Pharisees were the religious elite of the day, powerbrokers in the area of Jewish law and the gatekeepers of the Abrahamic covenant. They despised the Roman occupiers, unlike the Herodians, who were largely a political group. They would be considered realists, people who accepted the reality of Roman rule and actually embraced the Herods who were placed in power over the people. The Pharisees would have condemned the Herodians as traitors, disloyal to the Jewish identity, and to God. But as we all know, politics makes strange bedfellows, and so, though they are barely able to conceal their utter disdain for one another, holding their nose, they work together to try to get to Jesus, their common enemy.

Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? You can hear the hypocrisy dripping from their mouths and Jesus immediately recognizes the malice, the evil, in their hearts. Say it's not lawful to pay taxes to the emperor and get crucified by the Romans for sedition and fomenting rebellion. Say it is lawful and Jesus loses the crowd who hate the Romans. **A no win situation. Jesus' enemies think they've got him cornered. But they couldn't be more wrong.** After demanding to be shown the coin used to pay the tax, a denarius, which bears the image of Caesar, which, ironically is quickly produced, even in the temple where graven images are especially prohibited, Jesus answers, **give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.** Of course, it's the second half of that answer which is really loaded with meaning for us. Give to God the things that are God's. If Jesus intends for us to understand that we are to give to the emperor, or to the empire, whatever empire that might be, the things that bear the mark of the empire, **then when he says that we are to give to God the things that are God's, he must also mean that we are to give to God that which bears God's mark.**

Here's where we need to recall the creation story in Genesis which tells us that God created humankind in God's image, after God's own likeness...so God created male and female in

God's image, in the image of God we were created. If our money bears the mark of our empire, **we** bear the mark of our maker. If we are to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's, **surely then we are to give to God all that we are!**

Jesus' answer stumps his questioners and they leave him alone, at least for the moment. But his teaching remains with us in this Lenten season. Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. **As those created in the image of God, who bear God's own likeness, that leaves us in a bit of a difficult situation doesn't it? How willing are we to offer to God all that we are? How willing are you, how willing am I?** How willing are we to risk, even if we won't incur the threat of execution or abandonment that Jesus faced, how willing are we to speak, to teach, to risk being challenged, for the sake of the one whose image we bear?

I go back to what Richard said in his comments about risk. That beautiful heron flew towards Richard, risking danger because that heron desired something more than it feared. **What is it that we want more than we're afraid of? What is worth risking everything for? Richard called it risk in the service of a worthwhile life. And what would that kind of life look like?**

I have to think that the kind of life worth risking everything for has to be a life that aligns closely with what Jesus proclaimed about the kingdom of God. **It's about a life that loves God deeply and embodies that love in how we love others, especially those who are most vulnerable.** I've got to believe that includes how we love in the midst of this pandemic. The longer the pandemic and its associated restrictions drag on, and now the closer we seem to be getting to some sort of break in its grip, some people seem to have run out of patience, demanding what they claim to be their rights, which seem to be set over and against the rights of others, the rights of those who may be more vulnerable to the virus, the rights of those who are willing to assume limits to their own rights for the sake of all of us together. **It seems to me that loving in the way of Jesus would mean that sometimes we need to deny ourselves for the greater good of us all.**

I think a worthwhile life, one that is worth risking for; a life that aligns closely with the values Jesus preached about the kingdom of God, would also care about what we do with our money, and what is done, by others, with our money.²

If we don't particularly like paying taxes, and I don't know too many who do, even if our taxes are paid within a democratic form of government, not a tyrannical dictatorship, **we still should care about how those taxes are being used.** Is our tax system designed to benefit most those

² Levine, p.75

who are already wealthy, or it is being used to lift up those who are disadvantaged, who are struggling? It's not always a popular opinion to advocate for the poor, for the downtrodden, especially if those poor and downtrodden seem not to be pulling their own weight. **But the reasons why people are the way they are, are complex and not always easy to judge. But if we understand that we are created in the image of God and bear God's likeness in us, doesn't that apply to all human beings, to every human life?**

My sisters and brothers, fellow followers of Jesus, you, me, we, are created in the image of God, we bear God's image in us. **Because of who and whose we are, the answer to the question of what do we want more than we're afraid of isn't as difficult as we may think it is.** What we need is to live lives attuned and aligned closely with the values of the kingdom of God, **after all it's what we were created for.** So this Lent, as we continue our journey with Jesus, in the words of the hymn, **may we risk the hostile stare, should our lives attract or scare, and may we go and follow Jesus, if he but calls our name.**

Thanks be to God, Amen.