

October 18, 2020  
Rev. Meagan Sherman-Sporrong  
Matthew 22:15-21

This week I am not with you for Zoom worship because I am in Washington DC with my family. We kind of realized that during this year of pandemic we need to get out of our bubble every once in a while and travel somewhere. My family loves DC. It is one of the only cities we visited numerous times. There is an energy in DC that is unlike any other place, and the wisdom and history down every street is the kind of traveling we like to do.

I look forward to being with you all again next week. This is our last regular season worship for the year. 2020 has made time feel weird. There are events that happened three weeks ago, and I swear that it was last year while in the very same vein something else that happened three weeks ago could feel like it happened yesterday. I have never been this disjointed in time—even after having a baby when it feels like the world is foggy.

This is our last week learning from Jesus through parables and lessons. Next week we begin our celebrations when we celebrate the Reformation and Jenna's confirmation. The following week we will celebrate our ancestors on All Saints and share homemade altars for our loved ones who have gone on before us, and before Zoom worship begins, I will go to the church to ring the church bell for all the lives lost in Norridge to the Coronavirus.

The next week is the week after the election. I know tensions are high about this election. There is a lot of anxiety about the week following the election. Council decided to have a unity weekend following the election. More information will be shared, but that is another special Sunday service.

The following week, the week of November 15th, we normally go back to normal worship for two more weeks. We hear two more stories about Jesus preparing his disciples for his death. But you know what? I've had enough of death and who I call grumpy Jesus. I'm ready for the joy of Christmas, so we are going to start Advent two weeks early. During what I am calling pre-Advent we are going to

prepare to prepare. You will get an Advent box mailed to you. The box will include the makings for an Advent wreath and an Advent calendar. There will be a small gift from the church. If you have a kid in the family, there will be an extra gift for them. We will prep our home spaces to have a small Advent worship space for Sundays so that each Sunday, if we remain virtual, we can incorporate the aspects of physical worship into our self-guided worship at home.

We are fully aware of needing to live in two worlds this year. We are trying so hard to make this new virtual world feel and act like the world we lost in March, and we miss so much. But it just isn't. School and work are different for most of us. I don't like this new way of being a pastor or a hospice therapist. A mask on my face takes away so much of my pastoral care ability, and I started telling people, "I'm smiling in case you can't tell." I don't like this new way of parenting and being with my kids 100% of the time. All. The. Time. I don't like going into stores and seeing plexiglass between me and the person I am interacting with. I don't like having the "what does being safe mean to you" conversation before I want to have a physical interaction with a friend to see if I am comfortable with their level of being safe - it may not be the same as mine. I hate that my kids only interact with friends through social media, something I SWORE I would not give my kids access to before high school, but it is a different world we live in—a world we are fighting back against, even if it is not in our best interest to do so. That is what it is like to be human ... We are so tied to the world we live in we fight like heck when we are asked to live another way.

We know it is safer to wash hands, limit time with other people, wear a mask when you leave the house, limit shopping and time in crowded areas. In our community, many of us are not essential workers that have to serve others. We can follow the safety precautions to protect others, but we don't like it. So we don't do it. We like the old world, and we don't want to accept that we are in a new kind of way of living, and once the pandemic is over, even then, things will probably never go back to the ways things were before. This is called the new normal even if we don't want it to be.

But as Christians, we should already be used to this idea of living in two worlds. This Covid time is like an in-between time. The life we knew is gone, and we have

no idea what the world is going to look like once people begin getting a vaccine when it is available. This is much like Jesus with his disciples at this point in the Gospel. Jesus is teaching his disciples everything he can before he gets to Jerusalem, and the leaders of the community are getting more and more frustrated with him. Jesus needs to teach his disciples that they are in this world but not of this world, and the leaders in the community want to fight against that because they hold the power in this world and power is a strong drug.

See, Jesus is teaching that some of the world's things are not God's things, and this is probably the hardest lesson for both the disciples and the Pharisees to learn. And now for the first time, we are introduced to Herdoians as well, and I can only assume that this group of people does not have power because of their religious title but because of their political influence. After trying to trap Jesus with a riddle, the text says that the leaders were amazed, and maybe they were amazed because it is in this moment when they realized Jesus may just be who they do not want him to be. They realized that Jesus is not of this world and does not care for the limitations of this world.

Yet for us it is election season. A season we treat like a sport, and we pour billions into making sure our team wins. We place so much hope in a candidate, and we give the person all our trust for how the world can look if only they win the election. We make this person to be God-like, or at least we claim that their abilities are over and above God's abilities.

Yet this text comes at just the right moment in our political cycle, in our experience of this world, because it reminds us that the authorities of the world give gifts that are not God's gifts. Jesus asked the group if they had a coin on them, and something interesting I read in one of my commentaries this week is that they were not supposed to have that coin in this area anyway. The area they traveled to used shekels, not coins. The coins would have been worthless in the area, yet they carried the coins with them to a place they did not belong. But not only that, they pulled the coin out in the temple where it was not supposed to be. They are crossing the earthly line—the coin—and the Godly line—the temple—and first-century leaders would have taken notice.

Jesus helps them realize that the image on the coin is human, not God. So Jesus says give it back to him, Caesar. Jesus has no use for the earthly symbols of importance because Jesus is the son of God, and God's image is stamped on him in the way he lives. They see he is sincere, and this scares them because they do have the power, and they want to keep it. Are you going to give in to the world or give back to God? is Jesus's question to the leaders of the day. This shocks them, and they have to pause and think, and they walk away. That is their response, they walk away. The systems of the world work for them.

How far are you willing to go to stay part of the system of the world? Covid is reminding us that our lives are intertwined, and we do not live in separate spheres. When we are called into idolatrous situations, where do our loyalties lie? Idolatry can be to the coins the Pharisees carried. It could be to the power they held in the governmental system. It could be a false trust in God to protect you from a virus. It could be putting too much power into one political candidate to fix all the problems in our country that Covid has put a magnifying glass on. If we chose to put our loyalties in these places, in nationalism and individualism, there is a price we pay for this—for being too connected to this world that we forget that we are not only called to ask what would Jesus do, but we are called to imitate Jesus. The disciples lived between the margins. They lived between two worlds. Much like we are in our time and place. How do we live in this world? The ways in which your loyalties will be challenged between the earth needs, nationalistic needs vs. the needs of the spirit. Jesus does not want his disciples to withdraw from society. At the end of the gospel the last teaching that Jesus gives, after the death and the resurrection but right before the ascension, the last lesson and command was: I want you into the world making disciples. You need to be in this world because future disciples are of this world, and we need to invite them into the world of God. When we look at the world through the lens of God, we can hear the words of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians when he said that they were in need of faith, hope and love. It is what we all need a little more of these days—faith, love and HOPE. Hope that as we enter a new church year we can ask ourselves and pray about this question this week:

In spite of the fact that our current situation sucks are we inspired to imitate Christ?

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:  
Grace to you and peace.

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead--Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming. (1 Thessalonians 1:1-10)