



Grain

“Suffering does not justify suffering and, one injustice does not justify another and one crime does not warrant another.” –B’Tselem

Field

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “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. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” ²¹They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away. Matthew 22:15-22

Thoughts

Should we pay our taxes? That must have seemed like an impossible question to answer, a great one to trick Jesus. If he answered that Jewish people must refuse to pay their taxes, he could have appeared to be one of the Zealots, a group that believed their faith was synonymous with having an independent Jewish nation and that could be violent about getting results. The Pharisees knew Jesus wasn’t a Zealot. But if Jesus told Jewish people to pay their taxes, he would be siding with the Roman Empire. How does one live under occupation? How do the occupied and occupiers respond to an oppressive system in place? But that’s not what the particular religious leaders in this lesson wanted an answer to from Jesus.

The question about taxes was never intended to elicit a meaningful response. There was no real dialogue reflected in this story. The leaders had already decided not to open their hearts to Jesus’ teachings that tapped into a love that extended beyond their expectation of a nationalistic Messiah. Yet Jesus managed to offer a compelling response that challenged their and can challenge our notions about fealty.

Where are our loyalties? To God or country or God and country? There is a temptation to conflate Christianity with patriotism or to insist our nation is Christian rather than recognize our faith as compelling us to have one voice in a pluralistic public square.

We also ask about loyalties to groups. Demonstrations have emerged to support Palestinians and separate ones to support Israelis in the midst of the heartbreaking devastation to both sides. The trauma Israeli and Palestinian citizens have been experiencing is beyond what most of us can imagine. To those who have lived in the Holy Land or have visited or followed the news and our own Lutheran presence there, trauma may also feel close to home.

Which lives are valued? As we support Jewish and Palestinian people seeking justice amid terror from all sides within an occupied land, let us give to God what is God’s and acknowledge the great value of life on all sides. We pray for a unified side for justice and peace. Happy Monday!

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Many blessings upon you,

Pastor Cindy