

## ***A Tax Paying Fish????***

A Reflection for Morning Worship on the Star Words: *Humor & Playfulness*

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Sunday, February 6, 2022 – A Communion Sunday

Text: Matthew 17:24-27

I don't know about you but I am already sick of the TV commercials about tax preparation services, and it's only the first weekend in February. There are the straight forward ones with a clean cut guy sitting at a desk with an anxious couple sitting in front of him who relax into smiles when they place their taxes paperwork in his supposedly capable hands. Then there are the more creative ones with this lady floating between all these scenes of folks doing unusual things and she is assuring them that no matter how odd their profession is, her tax firm is up to the challenge of finding them deductions! And of course, there are the advertisements for those tax software programs which promise all you need to do is "plug in your numbers" and they do the rest, large refunds practically guaranteed at a bargain basement price! Yeah, right.

Taxes are part of life, a fact recalled in a rather famous quote by none other than Benjamin Franklin who supposedly said, "nothing is certain in life but death and taxes." Finding out it was Ben Franklin who said this was a surprise to me because for some reason I was convinced it was Mark Twain. But then again, it could have also been Mark Twain because when you google this quote all kinds of folks pop up who are credited with saying it first. Maybe it was a French philosopher whom Franklin met while living in Paris and he brought the quote back with him to the newly formed US. Or maybe it was two authors writing in the

early 1700's whose thoughts Franklin shared as his own. Who knows who said it first and does it really matter? No, not really.

What does matter in regard to our mutual reflections today is that even Jesus had to worry about paying taxes, and that's something to keep in mind as we head into the bowels of tax season this year. Jesus had to deal with two different kinds of taxes. The first were the crushing taxes levied on their conquered peoples by the Roman Empire. These taxes were collected for the empire by hand-picked local officials called "publicans" who were notorious for collecting much more than was due in order to line their own pockets. So, these tax men were loathed by the peasants of Jesus' time. This is why one of the criticisms of Jesus which kept coming up was that he routinely ate with "publicans and sinners." This is also the origin of one of Jesus' more memorable quotes when it comes to taxes: "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and render to God what is God's." Luke 20:25.

Today's story is about the other tax Jesus was required to pay, the Temple Tax. This tax goes all the way back to the days of King Solomon when the first Temple was built. It was levied by Solomon – surprise, surprise – to pay for the upkeep and maintenance of the Temple and the priests needed to serve there. After the fall of Israel and Judah, conquering governments, like the Persians and then the Romans, upped the taxes in order to take an additional amount for themselves. Even King Herod benefitted from the Temple Tax, a half a shekel at that time. That means the Temple Tax during Jesus' lifetime would have been roughly \$1.50 in current US dollars. Doesn't sound like a lot until you realize that annual incomes in Jesus' time were at the subsistence level. Few people even had coins at all since most

exchange was on the bartering level for agrarian products. But the Temple Tax did need to be paid in coin. Also important to realize is that it was the government levying this tax on every Jew regardless of whether or not they were practicing their faith. And this tax would have been in addition to the other taxes the people were expected to pay so it was indeed a burden to pay it. Thus, the dilemma faced by Jesus and Peter when the collectors of the Temple tax made clear it needed to be paid. It also sets the stage for one of the least known and most humorous stories in the Gospels.

This is a very brief story, as Jesus stories go, but it is simply delightful. The story begins when Jesus and the disciples, Peter among them, arrive in Capernaum. The collectors of the Temple tax were apparently very diligent in their duties because as soon as they arrived in town, those officials came to Peter and asked him if Jesus paid the Temple tax to which Peter responded that he did. From the text itself, it's hard to know Peter's tone in his response. Was he indignant that they would even ask such a thing of Jesus, as in "of course he pays the tax, why wouldn't he?" Or was it more anxious like, "gosh, we don't want any trouble. Yes, Jesus pays the tax. I'll take care of it." It's interesting to me in this story that these tax collectors don't go to Jesus directly, perhaps because they know how deft he is at turning people's words back on themselves. For whatever reason, it was Peter they asked and Peter who answered.

So, Peter goes back to Jesus and they have a conversation about the Temple tax and once again Jesus uses this question as a teachable moment. He doesn't give Peter a straight answer. Instead, he asks his own question, "What do you think Simon?"

From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?” Important to know about this quote is that Jesus was, for once, not speaking metaphorically. The children Jesus is referring to here are the kings’ own children. So, Jesus is really asking, do the kings’ own children pay these taxes or do others pay it for all. Peter, who knew how the system was rigged, answered correctly when he responded, “from others.” Jesus next response is metaphorical once again when he responds to Peter, “then the children are free.” The children Jesus is referring to here are God’s children, the king of heaven’s children, which is everyone. Once again, Jesus turns the whole notion of who pays taxes on its ear, but in a different way. This time he’s saying, if the king’s kids don’t have to pay the taxes levied, then no one has to pay them.” Now that’s a radical concept, even today!

Jesus doesn’t stop there though. And this is where this story becomes playful, fun and even humorous. Jesus tells Peter that, even though he doesn’t think anyone should have to pay this tax, he doesn’t want to offend the Temple authorities by not paying it. And then he gives Peter some rather odd instructions on what to do. Peter, the fisherman, is to go to the sea and cast a hook out into the water. Then he is to take the first fish he catches and open its mouth where he will find a coin. He is to take that coin from the fish’s mouth and use it to pay the Temple tax for Peter and himself.

Maybe it’s me but I think this is an absolutely hilarious solution to what could have been a very thorny situation for Jesus and the disciples. Peter is to use the skills he had used in his previous life BJ -- “Before Jesus” -- to catch a fish. He didn’t have to target any specific fish with his hook. He was just to cast out

and trust that his hook would find the fish with the coin in its mouth. Presumably that's just what Peter did, but we don't know because the story ends with Jesus telling Peter what to do. It doesn't tell us Peter actually did it. Assuming he did, though, try to imagine the smug tax collectors when Peter shows up with a slimey, smelly coin and plunks it into their hands. I'm thinking they weren't smiling much after that. And we can just imagine Peter turning his back to them and walking back to Jesus with a huge grin on his face. I love this image!

So, what are the lessons we can take from this very simple and often overlooked story? For one, Jesus was very smart. He understood all the intricacies of the economic and power structures he had to contend with every day in order to do what God had sent him to do. We also know that Jesus was determined to retain control of his work and ministry until the moment when it was meant to end with his death and resurrection. This is why he paid the Temple tax and why he did it in such a flippant, whimsical and humorous way. I also love that the text in Matthew makes clear this was an exchange between Peter and Jesus. We have no reason to think the other disciples knew anything about it. There was a problem to be solved and Peter and Jesus solved it in a most unique and funny way.

Another important lesson I think we can take from this story is one too often missed and glossed over when we consider it. That is that Jesus definitely knew the importance of maintaining a humorous and playful component to his work. This story gives us just a glimpse of what I am sure happened frequently when it was just Jesus and the disciples "hanging out" during those years they were on the road together, carrying out God's work as Jesus

understood it. Jesus and the disciples were indeed friends. Friends who supported each other through impossible challenges and exhausting days. Friends who knew the importance of keeping hearts and minds open to whatever Jesus had in mind for them on any given day. And, they were friends who laughed together when the situation warranted it. The disciples and Jesus were not dour men, seriously and somberly trudging along as they walked from town to town, mobbed at times by hordes of people needing help and guidance. In the final analysis this story reminds us that the disciples were just ordinary people who dared to believe that God had asked something uniquely special of them, something miraculous and life changing. And they all had the audacity to say yes without leaving their humanity behind.

That, I think, is the most valuable learning from this story. The tax paying fish reminds us that sometimes life is just funny and that it's okay to laugh, even when the situations surrounding us are serious and at times even frightening. The tax paying fish reminds us that Jesus was in fact very human and liked a good joke as much as the next person. This story draws us in to an intimate moment between Jesus and Peter so that it can challenge us to dare to respond creatively and even humorously to situations fraught with anxiety. That knowledge, dear ones, is a gift and one I urge you to hold on to with both hands.

But, before I end, I do need to make one thing very, very clear and this is important so I hope you're still listening! This story is not now nor was it ever intended to encourage you to take up fishing in order to pay your own taxes. That would be silly. ... But it sure would be fun, wouldn't it. Amen.

Sources:

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