

Heads or Tails

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
November 10, 2024 – Veterans Day Weekend
Text: Mark 12:13-17

So, it's been quite the week, hasn't it. The long-anticipated election has come and gone and here we are in the aftermath trying to catch our breath and find our feet. Some of us are beyond disappointed by the outcome while others are beyond elated. Some of us are frightened and feeling very vulnerable. Others see only better days ahead, not really able to comprehend the fear so palpable to the others. Put another way, the divisions that have brought us to this point are not one bit better than they were on November 4. Some would say they are much worse. Others would say the future is finally looking brighter. None of that changes the fact that we are where we are, like it or not. None of us know what the future holds, although there is no shortage of folks on both sides of the election outcome that would love to tell you, if you'll just hear them out. My first piece of advice this morning – don't let them.

If your candidate was on the losing side of this election, I know your pain. I am living it with you. I have been praying my way through my reactions and thoughts and my message this morning is my humble attempt to help us all begin to heal as next steps take shape. Allow me to remind you that the healing needed for us as individuals and for our country will not be like healing after a fall where you bruised a few ribs. It won't be like recovering from the flu where you feel really awful for a week or two and then you get better. No, the healing we need now will be much more like the healing needed after a major surgery which leaves behind a big painful incision, the need for patience and a realization that this recovery is going to take a while. But I do promise that hope will become easier to see and feel but not from anything this crazy situation will offer as it continues to unfold. Hope will reveal itself as we experience the soft joy of sunsets

and sunrises as the days and weeks pass by, uncovering possibilities little by little. Hope will sneak up on you in moments invested in the people you love the most. Hope may even take on different shades and nuances if we make a real effort to stop demonizing each other. That, I think, will be the absolute toughest part of our mutual healing from the aftermath of this election. No matter which side of this election you were on, we're all on the same path now. And we are going to need each other, that's for sure.

What feels so painful in this moment is the deep divisions currently scarring our great nation. How ironic that this Sunday, of all Sundays, is the one which falls on Veterans Day weekend. Originally called Armistice Day, Veterans Day has its origins as a day set aside to commemorate the end of World War I. The celebrations as the "war to end all wars" finally came to a close were joyful and confident that this was it – humans would never again allow themselves to sink to a point where war would be seen as a viable answer to solving problems. Our great-grandparents were confident that the horrors of war on this scale would never happen again. We all know that proved to be wishful thinking as wars have continued on almost without ceasing since then. It would seem that division is just part of the human DNA. Or is it? I don't think so because our God's starting point for each and every one of us on both sides of any conflict is the unconditional love God has for each of us, His beloved and cherished creation.

This is one important piece of our healing after this painful chapter in America's history. We must work to remember – all of us on both sides of our most current rift as a people – that God never sees us as "red" or "blue." God never endorsed any candidate, much as some might want to believe. God did not anoint someone to succeed or doom someone else to fail. These are strictly human affairs which means the current reality reverberating here in the US and around the world is 100% our responsibility. Both sides. Red and blue. Liberal and conservative. Middle of the road or intentionally self-removed

from the political grid. We are ALL responsible for what we are living through in this moment. And we are all asking the same question in this moment – what now?

I don't know. I don't think anyone really does. Emotions on both sides of these election results are running high, as are detailed "best guesses" of what we can expect moving forward in this new reality. I don't know about you, but I am just not interested in any of this kind of stuff right now. I can't. It's not in me. I'm not listening to news and keeping social media to a minimum. Many others have told me they are doing the same and I think that's wise. We are all suffering from severe information overload. Our brains literally can't take anymore. So, as part of the beginning of the healing process for us all, do yourself a favor and take a step back and away from the noise. Walk. Cook your favorite foods. Enjoy a glass of wine or a cup of tea as the sun sets. Breathe. Remember that Jesus was always going off by himself. We always assume this was to pray but maybe he just needed to sit in silence for a bit. I can totally imagine Jesus sitting on a dusty hillside, the ceaseless chatter of the day ringing in his ears, resting in God's presence as he got ready for another day. If Jesus found rest crucial for a reset, there is no doubt we will too.

So that's what I have been trying to do. I've been resting. I've been praying and I've been listening. I've been savoring the wind blowing through the trees, as red, gold and brown leaves swirl and pile up in the grass. I've been listening to the birds singing to greet the dawn oblivious to the chaos of the human world. I've been listening to delightful British murder mystery novels via audio books while I drive to and from work. (Side note: Bridge-mageddon is much more enjoyable with a good audio book!!) I've been listening to my neighbors working on their houses and yards as saws, leaf blowers and wood chippers tell the story of the neighbors' plans. I've also been listening to my favorite HGTV shows as folks with varying levels of

skill tackle all kinds of home renovation projects in all different parts of the country.

I confess these shows in particular have been my special solace these past few days. I realized that I have been gravitating to these shows because of the geographic, demographic and architectural diversity present in our great country which they unwittingly make so visible. These shows have made me realize how much I don't know about different parts of the country, of just how small my world actually is. That has become increasingly clear to me in these past few days as I watched folks renovate homes in Louisiana, Kansas, Iowa, California, Florida, and even my home state of Pennsylvania. I realized with startling clarity that I really don't have the slightest clue what it would be like to live on a farm in Kansas where the prairie rolls on for miles. I can't even imagine what living in a massive home on the inland waterway in Florida or a tiny condo in downtown Los Angeles would be like. In truth, in these last few days I have enjoyed these shows precisely because they have reminded me about how vast this country truly is. We are all Americans, yes. But we are so very different in more ways than we ever really stop to consider. Our country truly is the melting pot earlier generations imagined it to be, only now that same pot isn't melting. It's boiling over.

This is precisely the reality Jesus is confronted with in today's story from the Gospel of Mark. It's a story I thought might be the perfect one for the Sunday after the election because it's the one time Jesus addresses the issue of the connection between our faith and the government. Simply put, Jesus says there isn't one. He clearly says we are to "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and give to God the things that are God's." Not especially clarifying, is it? Well, maybe it can be if we think about it together a little more deeply. It helps to know that this is one story which appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospels which tells us, among other things, that it was most likely common knowledge among the first followers of Jesus.

Since it's a fairly mundane story it's not even included in the Revised Common Lectionary except for one time in the three year cycle and even then, it's not a major reading. Yet there it is. The message of this story mattered a lot to the first followers of Jesus. What about this story clicked with those ancient folks, and now with us? Let's try to figure it out.

Biblical scholars point us to the context of the story as a starting point for our discernments. It is considered primarily as an example of a time when the religious authorities (the Pharisees) and the local authorities (the Herodians) were trying to trick Jesus into saying something that would get him into trouble with the Romans so that he would be arrested and no longer a problem for them. In this instance, they thought they could trick him by asking if it was "lawful" for the Jewish people to pay taxes to Rome. The Pharisees knew that strict interpretation of the laws of the Torah would say it was not lawful to pay Roman taxes because that would be acknowledging another ruler as equal to God. Jesus knew this too, but he outsmarted them with a sort of non-answer answer. He asked for a Roman coin – a denarius – and then asked them whose head was on the coin. They answered, "the emperor's." That's when Jesus said they were to give to the emperor what belonged to the emperor and to God what belonged to God. Important to know here is that the Roman coin Jesus asked for was the only currency available, so it clearly belonged to the Roman emperor. This is why this story is often cited as the reason the separation of church and state is crucial in any government.

I read this story differently now in light of the election we just lived through. To me, this story illustrates that so much of what we experience in life is the result of a sort of existential coin toss. Heads or tails. How the coin lands when it's flipped determines what comes after. Heads, someone wins but somebody loses. Tails, someone wins and somebody loses. It all comes down to which side of the coin you claim as your own. This I think is Jesus' precise point. The coin is not

now nor was it ever God's. The heads or tails results of this recent election or any election is not God's doing. I think both sides lost sight of this truth in this recent election. Both sides claimed to be doing the right thing, the best thing, the moral thing, the only thing that would make "everything" (whatever that even would be) all right again. Dear ones, that was never true for either side. There was always going to be pain after this election no matter who won. We just so wanted to believe it was going to reveal a smooth and clear path forward that we forgot God was not on one side or the other. The real truth is that God was on neither side and both sides. Dear ones, God only ever cared about one thing – the people – because God loves each one just the same. This is one time when God's message of unconditional love is so very hard to hear.

Jesus and the Great Commandment remind us of God's unconditional love all the time! When asked which was the greatest commandment, Jesus answered very clearly that we are to love God with all that we are and all that we have and that we are to love the other as much as we love ourselves. Dear ones, neither of these commandments was fully present in either side of this election season as much as we might want to believe differently. Why do I say that? Because there was, and is, fault on both sides. Both sides are guilty of demonizing the other. Both sides lost track of the humanity of their neighbors who supported a candidate other than their own. We all did this. I did this. And I was wrong. That's why my prayers this week have included prayers asking God for forgiveness for all those times I spoke about the other side as somehow less than because of things their candidate said or did. I had no right to do that. As a Christian, I should have known better but I fell into the same trap we all did. And, dear ones, no matter which side of this election coin you were on, you know you did the same thing. Both sides need to begin healing from the pain of this election by working up the strength to ask for forgiveness for failing to see the humanity of the people supporting

the other candidate. We need to remind ourselves that these others are not really “others.” They are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Dear ones, you do not need to agree with someone to know they are still beloved of God. You do not need to like them or trust them to know they are beloved of God. If we have fallen into the trap of thinking that someone’s vote entitles us to judge them in ways we would not want to be judged ourselves, then we have put God into a coin toss that God was never a part of. We all did that, both sides, and it’s time to stop. We have to stop because our country absolutely will not survive if we do not figure out how to move beyond the extraordinary divisiveness that is tearing our country – and us – apart. We have to find it within ourselves to admit that we all own where we are now, and we all have to be part of the solution. We have to move way beyond the coin toss mentality that got us here and, dear ones, that happens one person at a time.

“Now what” is the question on everyone’s minds once Tuesday was over. Yes, those of us who were disappointed need to take time to rest and heal from our disappointment, to let our grief over what feels like a death of hope and possibility run its course. Then we need to be ready to organize and work for the change we want to see. Yes, those of us who were elated at the election results deserve to celebrate the success of what was hoped for. But, once the elation subsides, we also need to hear and acknowledge the very real fear others are experiencing. News stories of incidents happening around the country are already proving those fears were not unfounded. Right here in this part of CT a lesbian pastor of a UCC church received a threat the day after the election. She’s terrified and I don’t blame her. Those of you on the winning side need to accept that her fear is not unfounded.

So, where do we go from here? The only place we can – forward into God’s future. And how do we do that? Humbly, gently, and committed to being the people of God in word and deed, all the time.

Will we all agree on everything? No, of course not! Can we work to find common ground? Yes, but it won't be easy. And it will only happen one person at a time. And here's my suggestion on one way to start. Find one person whom you know was on the other side of this election than you were and reach out to them in some small way. Smile. Wave. If you're feeling especially brave, just say "hi – how are you?" Then, who knows what might happen. It's a heads or tails situation for sure but with a distinct possibility that both of you can win because God is not the coin. God is in the winds of possibility swirling around you both. Amen.