

THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | OCTOBER 22, 2023

ISAIAH 45:1-7 | PSALM 96:1-9 | 1 THESSALONIANS 1:1-10 | MATTHEW 22:15-22

There's an old trope that shows up in a lot of mysteries and who-dun-its. The detective, who's been struggling to crack the case, will be sitting in an interrogation room with a suspect. Just when it seems that the case is about to go cold, the detective will throw a Hail Mary and say something like, "It was you who killed Professor Plum in the library with the candlestick." The suspect will get a surprised look on their face and say, "Who told you?" And the detective will lean back in her chair, crack a smile, and—if the movie was made in the 90s—take a drag on her cigarette, and say, "You just did."

That's essentially what happens in today's gospel reading. Jesus has been sparring back and forth with the religious authorities in Jerusalem. These leaders think that he's a phony or a trickster or that he's out to deceive people. And so for the past few weeks, we've been hearing them trade barbs and accusations.

Most of those conversations could have occurred anywhere. But for today's reading, the setting is particularly important. This meeting takes place in the temple grounds. This is the holiest site within Jewish practice. And even if you don't know much about the temple, you probably know the story of Jesus flipping the moneychangers' tables. These were people who took money emperor's face on it and exchanged it for "neutral" money that could be used inside the temple.¹ The whole reason they had moneychangers was because to bring money with the emperor's face into this holiest of sites was an act of desecration and idolatry.

Reread the conversation with that in mind and it takes on a new meaning. A group of religious authorities—the community's leaders on religious practice and role models that people are supposed to look up to—come to Jesus and ask him if it's okay to pay taxes. If Jesus says it is okay, he's just a puppet of the occupying regime. If he says it's not okay, he'll be targeted as a seditionist and, presumably, executed. So Jesus says, "Well, show me the coins you use to pay taxes." Now, if the authorities were being careful, they would reply, "Well, we don't have the coins here with us. You're not supposed to have those in the temple grounds. Didn't your parent(s) ever teach you anything about Judaism?" Instead, one of them reaches into his pocket and says, "Yea, here you go."

It's an all-time own goal. Because the religious authorities inadvertently reveal something about themselves that Jesus could never get them to admit outright. These individuals who are supposed to be the leaders in devotion and liturgical practice have high standards. But those standards are only for other people. The appearances are immaculate. The reality isn't quite as impressive.

So the reason St. Matthew tells us this story is not just to make a point about paying taxes, and it's certainly not to tee up a fall stewardship campaign. It's a story about coherence between public and private, between words and actions, between ideals and practices. In other words, it's a story about integrity.

We need integrity to be in have healthy relationships. If you've ever been in a relationship with someone with dubious integrity, you know how frustrating it is. Because you never really know if you can trust them. You never know which version of them you're going to get. You never know whether they're going to do what they say. And most important, you never know if they have some hidden agenda that they're not telling you about.

¹ Good summary here: James McGrath, "Jesus and the Money Changers (John 2:13-16)," Bible Odyssey, accessed October 17, 2023, <https://blog.bibleodyssey.com/passages/main-articles/jesus-and-the-money-changers-john-213-16/>.

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

This is the contrast Matthew sets up between Jesus and the religious authorities. The point is that when Jesus invites us into relationship, he has no hidden agenda. When Jesus breaks bread with us, it's not so we do him a favor later on. When Jesus loves us, there's no undisclosed terms and conditions. What we see in Jesus—the love of God poured out and given to all people—is what we get. This is someone who is worthy of our trust.

We heard another example of this dynamic in today's reading from 1 Thessalonians. This is, as an aside, likely the oldest piece of writing in the New Testament. This was written probably fifteen to twenty years after Jesus's death and resurrection. And part of what makes it so interesting is that it gives us an idea of what life was like for the first followers of Jesus and how the gospel spread.

St. Paul is unusually effusive when he describes their community. He writes, "We know [God] 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."

If the message of the gospel came in "word only," the Thessalonians would be like the religious authorities in today's gospel reading. Very impressive at first glance but disappointing once you realized what was actually going on. Sure, you come in with high expectations, but then you'd start to think, *This isn't the way it looked in the brochure.*

But Paul tells us that the gospel came not just in words but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. There is a continuity between the words that they proclaim and the hospitality and service they exhibit to others. In other words, this community has integrity. And this integrity gives them credibility as they love and serve. They have earned the right to be heard in their community because people can trust that they have no other agenda than the community's welfare and flourishing.²

This is the kind of integrity the Holy Spirit gives us as we live our vocations in the world. But this integrity, this coherence between our words and actions, is given to us in a rather unexpected way. The way the Holy Spirit gives us integrity is not by giving us some superpower to make our lives perfect. If you think the people in church are morally superior to everyone else, I hate to be the bearer of bad news. No, the Holy Spirit gives us integrity by granting us the courage to be honest about our shortcomings.

Unlike the religious authorities who put a massive amount of time and energy into keeping up appearances of devotion and righteousness, we can be transparent with people. God's love, God's forgiveness, God's compassion is perfect. But that perfect love, perfect forgiveness, and perfect compassion is extended to the world by imperfect people. We can be hostile instead of curious when we encounter new people. We can value convenience over compassion when we're in a hurry. We can be excessively harsh in our judgement of others and endlessly lenient in our appraisal of ourselves. And yet, Jesus keeps on calling us and forgiving us and nurturing us and sending us to serve.

Instead of putting up a good front, Jesus invites us to follow him as we really are. Instead of living with partial truths, Christ empowers us to live with whole conviction. And instead of worrying that we're going to be found out, Jesus promises us that we are already known. Because even when our actions become disjointed from our ideals, there is nothing that can cleave us from the love of God.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² "The saying of the gospel needs to be enfolded in the sayers in order for it to be heard and given credence." Darrell L. Guder, *Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1985), 145.

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG