

“Sideways”
Matthew 22:15-22
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost; October 18, 2020

Back in October 2004, a small budget “sleeper” movie called *Sideways* became an unexpected hit. The film’s plot revolved around mid-life commitment issues that focused on finally growing-up and being an adult. The backdrop of the film featured a wine variety called “pinot noir” in the now horribly-ravaged California wine country. The story told about two guy-friends on a pre-wedding trip, sampling wines as they struggled to get their lives together.



The title of the film, *Sideways*, had two different references. While these buddies were trying to figure out the direction and purpose of their lives, they were going “sideways” — slipping and sliding, flipping and flopping through life from one side to another as they yearned for some meaning. But “sideways” also had some specific grape-growing and wine-making connotations. Newly-bottled wines are stored on their sides to age and mature. But those “sides” have to be frequently

changed, as the bottles are periodically and carefully “turned.” This allows the vintage to cultivate its complexity.

“Sideways” is also the description of the Santa Ynez region in California wine country. The Santa Ynez region is unusual and “sideways” because the mountains there run east and west instead of north and south like all the other western mountain ranges. The “sideways” geography of the Santa Ynez region has several microclimates each enabling vintners to produce distinctive, highly-localized varieties of grapes in their vineyards. Being “sideways” makes possible more varieties of wine.

The New Testament depicts Jesus as a Jew in 1st century Palestine



who appreciated good wine, so it isn't too much of a stretch to connect the story we just heard from Matthew's gospel and comparing it to the

difference between taking “sides” and being “sideways.” Jesus is confronted by an entourage of Pharisees, as well as a group identified as “Herodians.”

“Herodians” are only mentioned twice in the New Testament and nowhere else in 1st century literature. They obviously were supporters of the tetrarch Herod Antipas — and so, like Jesus, they were Galileans. Supposedly this would have made these “Herodians” sympathetic to Roman law, since it was support from Rome that kept Herod Antipas securely in power. Before these Pharisees and Herodians put their question before Jesus, they poured-out some sugar coating. They admit that Jesus is “truthful.” They acknowledge that Jesus’s teachings are “in accordance with God’s way.” Furthermore, they try to butter-up Jesus by saying how impressed they are that he doesn’t try to “flatter people or favor them.” In other words, they admit that Jesus doesn’t make judgments based on favors he might want to curry among any influential political or religious group. After the sugar comes the spice, like black pepper on ice cream. They serve Jesus a question that’s carefully designed to make him look bad no matter how he answers.

“So tell us what you think. Is it lawful to pay tribute to Caesar, or not?” The “tribute” these questioners are referring to is the “poll tax,” basically a tax on having your head on your shoulders while living in

Roman territory. It's not a tax based upon goods being shipped in or out of the country. It's not a tax that benefits those who pay the tax in any way. The collected "poll tax" is a "direct deposit" into Caesar's general coffers, with nothing going to the poor villages or territories that pay it.

It's a dirty question. If Jesus says that it's a requirement of Jews to pay this hated tax, a tax that requires payment in the form of a Roman coin, a coin stamped with the idolatrous image of Tiberius Caesar and the declaration that Caesar is a "god" — the religious establishment and the restless Jewish citizenry who despise Rome will denounce Jesus. So that's one bad way to answer. The other bad way is Jesus declaring the tax and its required coinage — the Roman denar — to be an "unlawful" burden upon the Jews. If he says that then the mighty fist of Rome could pound upon him. The Romans considered non-payment of taxes as sedition and they dealt with it accordingly. Let's just say that nobody tried it a second time. And so the question balances precariously on a knife's edge of religious and political judgments.

We can imagine Jesus rolling his eyes and shaking his head before responding and refusing to take a "side." Jesus instead tacks

“sideways.” He’s quick on his feet and finds an unexpected way to look at the question. He posits a sideways: a *tertium quid*, a third way that’s indefinite and undefined but is related to two definite or known ways. Yet Jesus doesn’t “sugar coat” the “evil intentions” that obviously lies behind this line of questioning. He sighs, “Why are you trying to trick me, you hypocrites?”

Jesus knows his head is on the chopping block: “Show me the tribute coin.” The coin of the triumph of Rome, of course, shows the image of Tiberius Caesar. Despite the fact that both a human pictorial and inscription about Caesar’s “divinity” are stamped on this coin, Jesus says as it’s held up in front of his face, “This...image...and this...inscription. Who do they belong to?”

“Caesar,” they say.

“Well then,” says Jesus, “you’d better give Caesar back what belongs to Caesar! And — give God back what belongs to God!”

These Pharisees and Herodians were so smug. Matthew says that when they heard Jesus’s response, “they were astonished. They left him and went away.”

Roman money had no moral consequence in Jesus's judgment: Give it, get it, pass it on, pass it by, use it or reject it. Roman money didn't fund one's soul. Jesus's summery words forever changed the focus of any inquisitor's question when it comes to money: "Give God back what belongs to God." In other words, people of God, Jesus proclaimed to anybody and everybody who would test him: be about your Father's business, the kingdom business, not Caesar's business.

Jesus's message is a lesson that we sorely need to hear and understand especially today. So in order to receive the lesson properly we need think through and do two things: We need to redefine "Caesar." And we need to tip "sideways."

The following is my opinion is based upon a literal understanding of Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Maybe I'm too simple-minded or naive to consider otherwise, but I don't think Jesus intends the beatitudes to be somehow optional for his would-be followers.

Throughout the centuries the Church has been far too willing to give to God what is Caesar's and to give to Caesar what is God's. The

most basic difference here is what “business” Caesar is in, versus what “business” the Church is in.

The “business” of Caesar, of the world, is power and success, war and conflict. It’s characterized by cut-throat behavior with both tongue and sword to bring in profit and position. In contrast, the business of the Church is “peace” — a countercultural way of living that opens doors to the kingdom of heaven.

There’s a long lineage of literature starting with St. Augustine of



Hippo that touts “just war” theory. “Caesar” — the big kahuna of any given militant, expansionary empire — was almost always in the “war business.” This obviously wasn’t

just some ancient political problem, because in each and every generation a new “Caesar” shows-up to rule, make demands, and force the issue of “taking sides.” From the time it was claimed by Constantine the Great in the 2nd century, the church — by and large — has continued to enable various “Caesars” by providing the rationale for violent conflict, the basic arguments for a “just war.” The church “took

a side” in order to help “Caesar,” the ruling political power, when it rationalized and defended the concept of a “just” war.

Finding a way to rationalize and normalize animosity, violence, hatred, and fear isn’t the church’s issue. It’s Caesar’s issue. People of faith need to “give Caesar back what belongs to Caesar” — whoever “Caesar” may be — and not take Caesar’s “side” as their own. The church is in the “business” of peace and good-will. The church is in the “business” of planting the flag of the kingdom of God in this world. The business of the church is lifting the kingdom banner high. The church is to “give God back what belongs to God ”— which is nothing less than standing sideways to the world’s ways and proclaiming the gospel message of the Lord Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

If there’s any consistent theme throughout scripture it’s that God is always an advocate for the dispossessed, the displaced, the abandoned, the dumped, the stepped-on, the kicked-out. Being refuse and refugees is the story of God’s people from Abraham to Moses to Jeremiah and Isaiah. The Israelites spent far more time shifting back and forth than they did being settled in any one place. Jesus joined in that long lineage

of refugee status when he was hounded out of Galilee by a murderous mob, sending him and his disciples on a two-year “refugee mission” across Palestine. Jesus and his first disciples stood “sideways” to those in both the religious and political realms, a position that made it necessary for them to “keep moving along” all the time.

“Moving along” all the time is what I do especially during a contentious election year when people might try to pin the pastor down regarding which side he’s on. My responsibility is to preach the gospel with respect for what scripture says. There’s no agenda other than the hope that the Holy Spirit will challenge us in the manner that he deems fit to challenge us as we follow Jesus in his kingdom way.

Whichever “Caesar” you prefer is not to be confused with the kingdom of God. Choosing to be “sideways” instead of taking sides takes a lot of backbone which brings us to Jesus. Thanks to Jesus, we can lean upon his cross to keep our backs steady.

I recall when Pope Francis visited the Colombian crucifix that was in the church sheltering 300 refugees when a bomb exploded and blew the everything up (along with the lives of many there hiding). The

statue of Jesus that the Marxist rebels tried to destroy survived, but its arms and legs were blown-off. This hand-less and feet-less Jesus is a powerful symbol of a mutilated and broken Jesus whose wounded side is always open to the deformed and broken of our world.



“I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty,” Pope Francis proclaimed, “because it has been out in the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”

We are all called to be Jesus’s arms, to be Jesus’s legs, to be Jesus’s hands, to be Jesus’s feet in this world. We look at life sideways, from the wounded-side of Jesus, and move sideways to pull people together in a world that pushes them apart. Jesus’s followers who lives at his side chose the only “side” that reaches out to all sides. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, one of the final tortures he endured was a spear thrust into his side. From that wound blood and water flowed, a final gift of

straight to the point of what the human heart is thinking or intends to do. No creature remains hidden before God. All are naked, laid bare before the eyes of the one to whom we must present an account.”

We can take positions — I have mine, you have yours — without taking “sides” because the only “side” we’re on is the side of Christ, a wounded-side which always leaves us in a sideways position to the world and siding with the sideways — the wounded, the broken, the battered, and the beaten. That’s every one of us — naked, sick and tired. Our souls, cut open to the quick — and we need to be healed.

Isaac Watt’s challenging hymn, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” has been much on my mind lately —

“See from His head, His hands, His feet, / Sorrow and love
flow mingled down! / Did e’er such love and sorrow meet, /
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

“Were the whole realm of nature mine, / That were a present
far too small; / Love so amazing, so divine, / Demands my
soul, my life, my all.” Amen.