
Moving Your Spiritual Identity Upstream

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
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Unedited transcript:

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of telling Godly Play stories to the LaAmistad kids. They come to the Cathedral for tutoring after school in the afternoon. After each story that we tell, we ask wondering questions. These questions are not designed to elicit the right answer. They're not supposed to be testing factual knowledge. They are supposed to engage the children's imagination and insight, their experience with a story. There is no right answer.

The first question is: I wonder which part of the story you liked best. It's wonderful to ask this question. The kids are almost jumping off the floor, raising their hands, waiting to be called on. And the moment you do, they're ready with the answer. "It was the chain in the desert box. It was the holy family. It was," this happens a lot, "the flame on the candle."

Then the second question: I wonder which part is most important? I wonder which part is most important? Something interesting happened while we were with these children because a pattern began to emerge. One day somebody raised their hand and said, "All of it." And the next child said, "All of it." And by the next week everybody was eager to be called on and all they could say was, "All of it. All of it. All of it." It was like a heavenly chorus. All of the story was most important.

Do you remember when the disciples asked Jesus, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called for a child to be put down among them and he said, "Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Now, the Pharisees and the Herodians are not asking Jesus wondering questions. They don't want to know about imagination and creativity. They don't even think there's a right answer. They just want to trap him. They've already decided to get rid of him and they're simply looking for a way to do it. The entrapment strategy starts simply enough, they compliment him. "You show no partiality. You would always tell the truth. You are a great man. Tell us, is it legal to pay taxes to Caesar?" In other words, is it in line with the Torah? Jesus, sensing their malice and hypocrisy, asked to see the coin that you would use to pay the tax. "Show me," he says, "the coin."

Of course they have a coin and foolishly produce it because you have to change your money into official coinage in order to pay the tax. So he says, "Whose image is on the coin?" Well, the image on the coin is the Roman emperor Tiberius Caesar. And to make matters even more interesting, the coin itself is inscribed with a proclamation that Caesar is the son of god. So when the Pharisees ask, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, they're saying, "Okay, Jesus, you know the Jewish law. The first commandment says, 'You'll have no other gods but me.' And the second commandment says, 'You will not make for yourself any idol.' Tiberius called himself a god, put his image on the coin. So which is it? Pay the tax, break the commandments, or refuse to pay the tax and risk a war that could eliminate the Jewish people?" In other words, it's idolatry to pay and suicide to refuse. This is not a wondering question, but Jesus has avoided the trap when he asked them to produce the coin.

They're still in the temple, mind you. Jesus has just overturned the tables of the money changers as if to bring

forth the prophet Zechariah's image of the temple being free from this obstacle to God. And by asking the question, he's signaling that he doesn't have one of those coins, but they do. It was probably the Herodians, they were the royalists. The Pharisees were much more patriotic. But once they produce the coin, Jesus does answer the question, "Whose face is on the coin?" Caesar's face. "Then pay to Caesar what is Caesar's and pay to God what is God's." Or from the King James version, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's."

Now over the years, this response has been interpreted as a biblical justification for the separation of church and state. And over the years, church has been thought by many to be something that's private and personal, whereas the affairs of state are public. Over the years, these two things have not stayed beside each other very well and the state, our political identity, has moved upstream, if you will, above our spiritual identity. The consequence of this movement upstream is that we tend to look at the world through the lens of our political identity, even God and the church. Once we establish a worldview that comes out of our politics, then everything else gets looked at through that lens. We may look at all of it, but increasingly we only see our part of it.

The things we talk about wind up being the things the political parties have told us are issues. However many things are going on in the world, we wind up talking about the three or four that they have chosen. The way we talk about it tends to be the way they have framed it. And perhaps not surprisingly, the issues they have chosen and the way they have framed them are often not designed to solve any problem at all. They're designed to force us to choose one party or the other. We may look at all of it, but we wind up seeing only our part of it. But this is not what Jesus said, and it's certainly not the way the world was constructed when he was walking on this earth. Jesus did say to give Caesar those things that are Caesar's. So pay the tax as if to say the government gave you the money, you can give the money back. But he also said, give to God those things that are God's. If what is Caesar's is that which bears the image of Caesar, what bears the image of God?

You do. I do. We all do. We bear the image of God. We are created in the image of God. Genesis tells us that. So to say to give to God what is God's is to say, give your whole soul, give your whole heart, give your whole being to God. Or you might say, move your spiritual identity upstream above your political identity. Look at the politics of your day through your relationship with God. I bet you've seen people on TV angrily saying, "Get your Bible out of our politics," as if it doesn't belong there. That would be a political identity upstream of a spiritual identity, but I think Jesus is saying, move your spiritual identity upstream of your political identity and look at the world through those lenses. You will look at all of it and you will see all of it.

I think Micah got it right when he said, "He has told you immortal what is good, and what does God require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." How would it be different if Micah were upstream of the other decisions that we make?

We're about to enter into a political season. Elections are just around the corner and things are going to get tense and conversations hard and angers are going to flare. So I'm going to suggest three spiritual practices that I want you to consider in hopes that they will allow you to move your spiritual identity upstream of your political identity. Now, I must confess that I really don't want to offer you these practices because I know what's going to happen. You're going to try to hold me accountable. You're going to stop me in the hallway and I'm going to have rendered some opinion. And you're going to say, "George..." But that's what church is, isn't it? Holding each other accountable for our spiritual practices. So here they are.

First practice, don't render opinions when you don't really know what you're talking about. This is in Leviticus 4:12. I mean, I do this all the time. The issues of the day are complicated and I've read an opinion piece, but I'm confident I know what I'm talking about. And the next thing I know I've rendered some opinion. To what end? To what end? So the first spiritual practice, don't render opinions about things that you don't really know what you're talking about.

The second practice, stop thinking that you have to convince the person you're talking to that you're right. Stop thinking that you have to persuade the person you're talking to that you're right. Now on the one hand, this is hard because I really want to be right and I want you to think I'm right and I really don't think I'm right until you think I'm right. On the other hand, when was the last time you entered into a political conversation with somebody that didn't agree with you and persuaded them of anything? Second practice, stop thinking you have to persuade the person you're talking to that you're right.

Third practice, identify somebody that doesn't agree with you. Call them up, go to coffee, go to lunch. Just have a conversation. Don't mention politics. You'll learn a lot about that person and you may indirectly learn a lot about why they've taken the positions that they have taken, not because you talked about the positions, but

because you got some sense of their values and their reasoning and their life experience. When we say that we are all created in the image of God, we're not saying that we're all the same. The truth is we are all different. We are all unique, and there is no reasonable way that we are all going to agree on anything, anything. Our goal is not to reach unanimity on any particular point of policy. Our goal is live together as community. Our goal is to be with each other through thick and thin. This is only possible I think, by moving our spiritual identity upstream of our political identity.

Do you remember when the disciples asked Jesus, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Jesus called a child whom he put among them, and he said, "Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." It is my hope that these practices and new ones which you will develop will help you like these children to feel the awe and the wonder of all of us together and somehow not be able to contain yourself as you raise your hand and just want to shout, "All of it. All of it. All of it." Amen.