The CATHEDRAL of ST. PHILIP
SERVING ATLANTA AND THE WORLD

10/22/2023

Moving Your Spiritual Identity Upstream

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 24, Year A

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—children who come to the Cathedral for tutoring after school. After each story we tell, we ask a set of wondering questions. These questions aren't designed to test factual knowledge or elicit a "right" answer. They are meant to engage the children's imagination, insight, and personal experience with the story.

The first question we ask is: I wonder which part of the story you liked best? It's always a delight to ask. The children practically leap off the floor, arms raised high, eager to be called on. And when they are, they're ready with an answer: "The chain in the desert box!" "The holy family!" And most often: "The flame on the candle!"

Then comes the second question: I wonder which part is the most important? Something interesting happened when we began asking this. One day, a child raised their hand and said, "All of it." Then the next child said the same. And by the next week, everyone was shouting joyfully, "All of it! All of it! All of it!" Like a heavenly chorus, they declared that the whole story mattered.

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

Now, contrast that with the Pharisees and the Herodians. They aren't asking Jesus wondering questions. They're not after imagination or discovery. They're not even looking for a right answer—they've already decided to get rid of him. This is a trap.

The entrapment starts with flattery: "You show no partiality. You always tell the truth. You are a great man. So, tell us: is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" In other words: Is paying the tax in line with the Torah?

Jesus, sensing their malice and hypocrisy, asks to see the coin used to pay the tax. "Show me the coin," he says.

Of course, they have one. To pay the tax, you had to use official Roman coinage. Jesus asks, "Whose image is on the coin?" It's the Roman emperor, Tiberius Caesar. And the coin is inscribed with the words, Tiberius Caesar, Son of God.

The trap is set: "So, Jesus, you know the commandments. The first says, 'You shall have no other gods before me.' The second says, 'You shall not make any idol.' Tiberius calls himself a god and places his image on this coin. So which is it? Pay the tax and break the commandments, or refuse to pay and risk a war with Rome?" In other words, it's idolatry to pay and suicide to refuse.

But Jesus has already stepped around the trap simply by asking to see the coin. They're still in the Temple—Jesus has just overturned the money changers' tables in a prophetic act. By asking for the coin, Jesus signals that he doesn't have one—but they do. Likely it was the Herodians who produced it; they were the royalists. The Pharisees were more concerned with purity and law.

Then comes his famous reply: "Whose face is on the coin?" "Caesar's." "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's,

and to God what is God's." Or, in the King James: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's."

Over the years, this response has been interpreted as a biblical argument for the separation of church and state. And, over time, church has come to be seen as private and personal, while the affairs of state are considered public. But these two have not remained side by side. Increasingly, our political identity has moved upstream—above our spiritual identity.

The result? We tend to see everything, even God and the church, through a political lens. We may look at all of it, but increasingly we see only our part of it.

Our public discourse is shaped by what political parties have decided are "the issues." Out of countless global concerns, we end up talking about the same three or four topics. The way we talk about them is often dictated by how they've been framed—usually in ways that don't aim to solve anything, but instead to polarize us into one political party or the other.

But that's not what Jesus said. And it's not how the world looked when Jesus walked the earth.

Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." In other words: pay the tax. The government gave you the money; you can give it back. But then he adds: "Give to God what is God's." And what bears the image of God?

You do. I do. We all do. Genesis tells us we are made in God's image.

To give to God what is God's is to give our whole selves—our hearts, souls, and lives. Or, to say it another way: move your spiritual identity upstream of your political identity. Let your relationship with God shape how you see the world, including politics—not the other way around.

You've probably seen someone on TV angrily say, "Get your Bible out of our politics!" That's what it looks like when our political identity is upstream of our spiritual identity. But Jesus is urging the opposite: let your spiritual identity be the lens through which you see everything else.

Then, you will look at all of it—and see all of it.

Micah put it beautifully: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

What if Micah's words shaped the rest of our decisions?

We're entering a political season. Elections are around the corner. Tensions will rise, conversations may get difficult, and tempers will flare.

So I want to suggest three spiritual practices that may help you move your spiritual identity upstream of your political one.

Now, I'll admit—I hesitate to offer them, because I know what's going to happen. Some of you will stop me in the hallway after I've said something and say, "George…" And you'll hold me accountable. But that's what church is: holding each other accountable for our spiritual practices.

Here they are:

First practice: Don't render opinions when you don't really know what you're talking about. I do this all the time. The issues of the day are complex. I read an op-ed and suddenly I'm an expert. But to what end? The first practice: be slow to speak on matters where your knowledge is thin.

Second practice: Stop thinking you need to convince the person you're talking to that you're right. This is hard. I want to be right. I want you to think I'm right. But when was the last time you changed someone's mind in a political conversation? The second practice is to release the need to persuade.

Third practice: Reach out to someone who disagrees with you. Call them. Invite them to coffee. Don't talk about politics. Just talk. You'll learn a lot about them. And maybe, indirectly, you'll come to understand the values and experiences that shape their views—not because you discussed positions, but because you listened to a person.

When we say that all people are created in the image of God, we're not saying we're all the same. We are gloriously different. And we are never all going to agree—on anything.

Our goal isn't unanimity. It's community. Our goal is to live together through thick and thin. And that's only possible, I think, when we move our spiritual identity upstream of our political one.

Do you remember what Jesus said when the disciples asked, "Who is the greatest?" He placed a child among them and said, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

It's my hope that these practices—and others you may discover—will help you, like those children, feel the awe and wonder of all of it. That you'll find yourself unable to contain your joy, raising your hand, eager to say:

"All of it. All of it. All of it."

Amen.