

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Lent 3-B; 15 April 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

Death and Taxes

In nomine...

I. Tax Day

I was pleased this year to discover that Tax Day is a movable holiday. Very few holidays on the church calendar will take precedence of a Sunday, because Sundays are always the Feast of the Resurrection of Our Lord. It looks like Tax Day also respects this convention and moves out to Tuesday!

Taxes are funny things. Taxes are often looked upon with fear and horror: someone is taking away something that is mine! Taxes are inevitable. Taxes are merciless, like death, bringing an end to our hopes and dreams.

Do not be afraid! When Jesus was asked about paying taxes, he pointed out that the coinage used was the government's coinage. Taxes are the cost of using that government's monetary system.

Taxes can be difficult to pay because we get used to thinking of money, and the power that it represents, as our own. But if you go look at a banknote, you'll see it is actually the property of another entity: that's not your name printed on it! It is the government's money and that money, and the power or potential it carries, is on loan to us from the government. It's best we don't get too attached to it. Money will always serve the issuing government first, and us only secondarily.

II. Thesis

This is the third Sunday in a row that we're reading about Jesus' resurrection appearances: the third Sunday in a row when the main words we hear repeated in our Gospel reading, over and over, are "Peace be with you!" "Do not be afraid!" Are you hearing a theme here, a pattern?

When Jesus showed back up in his disciples' lives after the crucifixion, they were so afraid and depressed that you might think it was Tax Day! The Scriptures had foretold the death of Jesus, but they had not been willing to hear. Jesus had represented many things to them, including power. They had particular expectations around Jesus and had invested their identities and hopes in those expectations. When Jesus was crucified, all those hopes were dashed and they felt like fools.

Like currency, the disciples were used to thinking of their lives as their own, and their hopes as the very definition of "good." The disciples still didn't comprehend that even Jesus' life was not his own. Like currency stamped with the name of the government that printed it, so each human being is stamped with the image of God. Jesus was aware of this like no one else had ever been, and this awareness enabled Jesus to turn his life over to God's purpose without the wincing and complaining that accompanies the payment of taxes. Jesus wasn't just doing his duty: Jesus was finding and fulfilling his identity, his purpose!

Can you hear the difference in perceptions here? From Jesus' point of view, everything that was happening was the will of God and had been planned from time immemorial. Even the prophets had caught glimpses of what would happen and reported it. Jesus was living into God's will for him! Jesus was finding fulfillment by living into God's purpose.

But for the disciples, the same events represented utter failure and existential threat. They were left drowning, gasping for breath, and wondering if the Romans who had executed their Lord would come for them next! The disciples failed to recognize that the purposes they favored and God's purposes were two distinct things. So Jesus' crucifixion and death made no sense to them whatsoever.

III. Good News

The good news is that, even if I disagree vehemently with many specific actions of our government, overall, much good is accomplished with the taxes I pay. Trade is facilitated, just verdicts are frequently rendered for the orphan and the widow, and the poor are helped in a variety of ways. We live here in a context of amazing privilege and freedom, made possible in large part by the taxes we pay. Payment of taxes doesn't take money away from me: it enables

all the good things I take for granted to happen so that I can have great freedom and great privilege.

In our Gospel today, Jesus greets his disciples with a prayer for peace and he seeks to soothe their fears. Jesus invites his disciples to touch him, to feel his skin and bones, to know he is not a ghost. Next Jesus eats a piece of fish. I suppose that is so they can know he's not a zombie, either.

What's going on is the fulfillment of God's purpose. What's going on is, in a word, resurrection. Jesus explains the Scriptures to his disciples and leads them to an understanding of what was, only moments before, unthinkable. Jesus' destiny, from the very start, was a cross and death. Because it was only by dying that Jesus could demonstrate the Resurrection power of God at work in the world. It was only by dying that Jesus could show his disciples that they were stamped with the image of God, and death is no obstacle to the fulfillment of God's purposes in them.

Jesus is intent on forming his disciples into credible witnesses of his resurrection, capable of transmitting their belief to others in an unbroken chain that leads all the way down to you and me.

IV. Invitation

I read this week that "life is designed for mutuality" and "we live by exchanges." That is the stamp of the Trinitarian God that has imprinted each of our souls, the stamp we acknowledged in our baptism. It is by our interactions with God and with God's world that we grow and become the people God created us to be.

We engage in these exchanges of mutuality in a variety of ways. We encounter God in the prayers of the daily office and at meals, in contemplation, in mindful living, and in spiritual conversations. God invites us to see God's presence in the world today and to recognize that all reality holds together in God. That is what we do with the different rites we celebrate as a church.

Jesus invites us to touch him in service. This looks like all kinds of things, from serving on the altar guild or vestry, teaching a children's class, or simply rehearsing the lections at home in preparation to read in church. We touch Jesus in service when we volunteer with Kitchen of Hope or prepare a meal for our Family Promise guests. We can touch the risen Lord as we serve in schools, in the Lion's club, or in relationships with our neighbors.

We find and fulfill our purpose in part in the ways we give. This means signing and fulfilling a pledge card at church, giving to other worthy causes, and remembering the church in your will. It means caring for those in need. It means leaving a generous tip in a restaurant. It means giving proportionally and sacrificially from your means as you remember the source of everything you have, and its ultimate purpose in being given into your stewardship.

The message of the Gospel, handed down from ages past, has become our inheritance and our responsibility. We, too, are stamped with the divine image of God. We, too, have been baptized into Christ, sealed with the Holy Spirit, and marked as Christ's own forever. Like Jesus, we exist for a purpose that includes but goes far beyond work and taxes and recreation. So Jesus continues to do the same work today with us that he did with his disciples. Jesus continues to teach us what it means to be made in the image of God and to have a purpose that extends far beyond little concepts like death and taxes.

So I wish you a good tax day, and encourage you to pray with me that more good than evil will be done with our tax dollars. Do not be afraid! Those things that look like loss and death are not beyond God's redeeming. As you and I look to Christ, God's purpose in us will be fulfilled. Not even death nor taxes will stand in the way. And the funny thing about God is that, in God's almighty hands, they might even prove useful to the cause.

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