

## “Faithful Resistance”

October 22, 2023

Scripture: I Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-23

There’s a story that’s told about the martyred theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer that may be apocryphal. You may remember that he was arrested by the Nazis in 1943 for his work with the resistance movement and possible role in a plot to assassinate Hitler. I’ve never been entirely certain what his connection to that was exactly, but it’s been written about extensively. The story is one day he was at a parade with a friend where Hitler was going by in a car. The whole crowd, of course, raised their arm in salute and as *der Führer* went by Bonhoeffer did the same. His friend was shocked! Why would he join the crowd in their worship of this monster? Bonhoeffer is reported to have turned to his friend and said, “We have bigger fish to fry.”

This encounter between Jesus and the Herodians and Pharisees reminds me of that story. Paying taxes, shockingly to us I’m sure, was resented by the population of Judea. They weren’t just paying to support the work of their own government; they were forced to pay for the support of the Roman government, basically paying the occupiers to occupy them. I don’t know much about “Herodians;” they don’t show up much in the gospels. But I would assume they were in favor of paying the taxes because they supported King Herod who was Rome’s puppet. The Pharisees, on the other hand, would have been opposed to supporting Rome. So, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” might be the philosophy behind this little mash-up. At any rate, both groups seem interested in painting Jesus into a corner.

In typical fashion, though, Jesus won’t give them a straight answer. He has them produce one of the coins used for the tax. Now, the interesting thing about this coin is it bears the image of Caesar, probably Tiberius, along with an inscription giving him a title of some sort. Among those titles might have been “Our Lord” or “High Priest”. The coins were used as currency but also as propaganda. It’s possible some people in Judea would have felt it was blasphemous even to hold one. So, by insisting they produce a coin, Jesus may have already exposed the hypocrisy of his opponents.

And, of course, his answer is famous: “Render unto Caesar...” That statement has been interpreted in a lot of different ways over the centuries. Often it’s used to support the idea that Christians have an obligation to support the government. There are other passages, such as Romans 13, where Paul writes, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God,” that are used the same way. You may remember the then U.S. Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, referred to it as justification for the policy of separating children from parents at the border back in 2018. It’s easy to misuse scripture to serve the purposes of people in power. So, we shouldn’t be too surprised that Jesus’ words would be interpreted that way.

Another common interpretation is to say he’s claiming there’s a clear separation between the material and spiritual worlds. By giving to Caesar what’s Caesar’s and to God what’s God’s we create a world where our actions in the secular or political sphere are disconnected from our spiritual lives. So, if the government is engaged in immoral policies toward minority groups or

weaker nations, our faith should have nothing to say about that. It can lead to an entirely private form of spirituality that never tries to influence the world around us.

I don't think Jesus means to say either of those things in his answer to these opponents. But I also don't think he's very interested in changing the political order. He lives in a world where that kind of change isn't really an option. It's the same world where Paul lived. The Roman Empire wasn't a democracy. People living in it, especially those from minority religions like Judaism, literally had no voice. There was no such thing as a right to assemble and petition the government. There was only conformity or resistance. Conformity meant you lived, which was Paul's concern for the Roman Christians; and resistance meant you were silenced, possibly through brutal imprisonment or possibly death.

Jesus chooses to resist, but he does that in a way that puzzles his followers and opponents alike. Many of his followers are waiting for him to lead a violent revolt; they want his resistance to destroy the enemy. But over and over he refuses to play that part. He refuses to be drawn into a violent confrontation. His opponents want to make him say something incriminating so they can bring charges against him, but he keeps speaking in parables and answering them in ways that leave them speechless. Jesus is practicing what I'm calling "faithful resistance." Faithful resistance refuses to see the enemy as an object to be destroyed. Even if that destruction is done in the name of God, it's following the way of Caesar. Instead Jesus simply dismisses the Empire and rejects its power.

So, giving these measly coins to a powerless ruler is meaningless. Jesus has bigger fish to fry, Bonhoeffer might say. In a world where the temptation to violence is so prevalent, figuring out how to resist faithfully can be a tremendous challenge. When Martin Luther King, Jr. and his colleagues in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference began their movement for civil rights in the south, one of the first things they had to do was train people in the ways of nonviolent resistance. How do Black students entering an all-white high school resist the hateful taunts, the spitting, even the beatings without retaliating? How does a group marching from Selma to Montgomery kneel in prayer as a battalion of state police descend on them wielding billy clubs and dogs without fighting back?

For Jesus the answer begins by insisting those who seem to be in charge actually have no power. This past week there was an election held in Poland. Poland has lately been drifting toward authoritarianism, much like Hungary, Turkey and Italy. The people in Poland, however, rejected it through what one observer calls "a victory of love and optimism...the opposition named the demonstration 'The March of a Million Hearts'." As scholar Ruth Ben-Ghiat, an expert in the rise of authoritarian governments, points out in a recent article, the power of solidarity and optimism is what defeats autocracy and preserves democracy. Faithful resistance relies on love and optimism.

That's what Jesus offers to those who follow him. Not retribution or vengeance, but joy in the face of hostility. When Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia," he's commending them for their faithful resistance. They've hung onto their identity as children of

God even when it's been costly to them. And they've hung onto it, not bitterly or resentfully, but joyfully. They've learned life is only worth living when we're engaged in acts of compassion and generosity.

The Thessalonian Christians have learned faithful resistance. Faithful resistance allows us to stand in opposition to the powers around us without losing our integrity. Faithful resistance keeps us centered on our identity as children of the living God as we resist calls for retribution. Faithful resistance instills joy in our hearts reflected in our actions and not hatred or fear. Cultivating a faithful resistance to a world full of Caesars, a world full of hostility and anger and despair, is how we render to God what belongs to God. We refuse to turn our hearts over to Caesar, even if we can't change Caesar's rules.

So, in a world where laws are passed to ban the teaching of racial history in classrooms, faithful resistance calls us to stand alongside our sisters and brothers of color and find alternative ways to learn our history. A number of churches in states where that's happened are banding together to provide classes for students that expose them to the realities of the history of slavery and mistreatment of Native Americans in our country. In places where people are being discriminated against because of their gender identity, churches and other places of worship are providing communities of welcome and support. The Caesars of this world can make all sorts of laws that target minority groups or deny the reality of our history, but those laws cannot make us hate one another or keep us from giving to God what is God's.

We live in a world where there are many voices calling for our allegiance. Lately we hear more and more about the need to protect ourselves from the arrival of immigrants seeking asylum or from the cost of providing more relief for people in poverty. It's easy to be influenced by voices of doom and dread, to be taken in by fear and indulge our prejudices. But because we are claimed by God we are free from all of that. We are free to love and be compassionate. We're free to reach out in empathy and speak for those who have no voice. We're free to live joyfully and seek the well-being of those who are left out or left behind. That's what belongs to God and what keeps our resistance faithful no matter what the cost.

Amen