

Matthew 22:15-22 Pastor Bill Uetracht 10/15/20 Pentecost 20

Since Covid 19 disrupted our lives, many of us, me included, have spent a lot of time at home. That time has enabled Bev and me to organize things more at the house. It's been so much fun. And boxes are so helpful for organization. You can have a box for your Halloween stuff, a box for your St. Patrick's Day stuff, a box for your Christmas stuff—or in our case, 15 or so. Life feels so much more under control when you have boxes. The basement or the storage spaces can look so much neater, so much more heavenly.

I don't think you can overestimate the significance of boxes. They work well not only for your stuff but for life in general. You know, you've got *your* religion box and *your* politics box. You've got your state box and your church box, your school box, your work box, your soccer box. And you are able to bring out these boxes whenever you want to and then put them away when you are finished with them. It's really convenient.

It works well for so many things. You have your *us* box and then your *them* box. You really want to make sure that elements in each of these boxes don't get mixed, for if they do, things can get a little messy. That messiness will challenge your whole life. You'll never get it back in order.

And then you have your box for evil and your box for good. These must remain entirely separate because they are separate realities. It's obvious what's good and what's bad. You don't want them to mix. And when they are mixed, your life will be changed forever. You will have to deal with yourself and other people in ways that you have never had to before. You don't want to do that.

You also can have a box for church stuff and a box for the real stuff out there in the real world—the smart people call these boxes the sacred and the secular boxes. It's obvious that the items in these boxes can never mix. Faith and the real world—those are separate things.

And while most of us do not put our money in boxes, unless some of you are storing it under your mattress or in some kind safety deposit box, thinking of money in terms of boxes can be quite helpful, too. You know,

your money can go in a God box and a Caesar or emperor box. You've got a box for the money you give away and then a box for the rest of it—the money you control, except perhaps for the taxes you begrudgingly have taken out of your checks.

Boxes are really handy, extremely helpful. They keep things in order. I think you should buy more of them, something with which Pat Clifford, our stewardship chair, who has spent much of his life in the corrugated box industry, would agree. You need more boxes, unless, for some reason, you have a sense of the call of the God of the Bible on your lives. Today it seems that God is taking on the box theology, that God wants us to bust out of the boxes that are created by human hands. After all, God cannot be confined to a box created by human hands. God is God, God seems to be saying today. "I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god."

God is God and God will act only as God will act. And what God does isn't always what you expect, for God cannot be confined to a box that you create with your minds or mold by your theology or your politics. Case in point: Cyrus the Persian. He's not one of us; he's one of them. He is not part of the sacred—he doesn't even know God's name. He's part of the secular. He is not the church; he is the state. Yet God says, according to Isaiah, that Cyrus is the anointed, the Messiah. God has chosen this secular one, one who knows nothing from a practitioner perspective about Jewish religion, to be the one who brings liberation to the people of God, especially to the exiles who have been forced to flee to another land.

The Babylonians had brought such horror to the people of God, and Cyrus is going to undo some of it. And sure enough, he did. He wasn't threatened as the Babylonians were by Jewish religious practice. He allowed the exiles to go home; he welcomed Jewish rites and practices. But he wasn't Jewish. He was a part of the *them* box.

Boxes don't work when it comes to God. And if we aren't quite sure that is true, God makes it very plain when he says, "I form light and create darkness; I make weal [well-being] and create woe." The reference here is to Persian religion, the kind of religion with which Cyrus would be acquainted.

Persian religion was known and is still known for its creation of boxes in relationship to good and evil. The Persians had gods that represented the good and the gods that represented the evil. Life was thought to be a big cosmic battle between good and evil.

Now some Christians have picked up this Persian notion and have defined life as a battle between God and Satan. And while there is some Biblical warrant for that (e.g., portions of Revelation), this is not the primary Biblical vision. In Isaiah today, God is said to be the one who creates light *and* darkness, well-being *and* woe. This obviously can create some interesting dialogue, some deep faith struggles. Is the suffering I know imposed upon me by God? Is God responsible for the evil in the world?

I don't think so. I don't like that conclusion. I think it's terribly unhelpful to think of suffering or pain as something that God gives to us, perhaps to teach us a lesson. It's such a sadistic view of God, one with which too many people operate.

But I think Isaiah's vision of God will not allow us to conclude that evil is simply a creation of an equally powerful-to-God force in the universe, that evil is not somehow still within the purview, the scope, and purposes of God. I don't think Covid is given to us by God to teach us a lesson. But I do believe that this evil can be utilized by God for the sake of compassionate and loving purposes. Dealing with life on the basis of an evil box and a good box is not sufficient. Life and God are much more complex.

Frankly, I think we find ourselves in the midst of God's complexity in our gospel reading for today. The story starts out with a religious group (the Pharisees) joining with a Roman political party of some sort, the Herodians, giving Jesus insincere flattery. "We know you are sincere. We know that you show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality." By this time, we feel like our boots are deep in you-know-what. "Tell us; is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

The Pharisees and the Herodians haven't come to H and R Block to get tax advice. They want to trick Jesus. They want to get him in trouble, for if he sides with the no-tax group he will be hated by the Romans who worry

that he is unsettling the empire. If, on the other hand, he sides with the pro-tax group he will become an enemy of many of the Jews, who resent the tax they must pay to support the occupational Roman forces. And this is paid for by a coin that has a picture of the emperor on it and says that he is the son of the divine one. What blasphemy for Jews! God is God. No emperor is God. In no way should such a coin make its way into the temple. That is why you have to exchange that coin for temple coinage.

Now I don't know if you noticed, but it didn't take long for the Pharisees to show Jesus the Roman coin that would be used for the tax. They have the filthy lucre in their pockets, while they are in the temple. What hypocrites!

"Whose head is on this coin and whose title is on it?" Jesus asks these deeply concerned and faithful Pharisees. "The emperor's, they respond." Then Jesus says, "Give, therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

Oh good! Some boxes, right? Church and state. Religion and politics. They are separate realities, right? Separate boxes, right? Politics and religion ought never to mix, right? Keep your church life fully separate from the rest of your life, right?

I am afraid it is much more complex. Yes, Jesus says, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's." Pay the tax, if you must. Someone once said, "Civilization is expensive, and taxes pay the tab." If you want a common life, life that we can enjoy together, we need to pay taxes. It's that simple. They can be used for some very good purposes, and yes, for some very bad ones.

Jesus response, though, doesn't end with the advice to pay taxes. He goes on to say: "Give to God the things that are God's." Let me ask you: "From a good Jewish perspective what things aren't God's?"

The response is obvious: All things belong to God. Jesus is not inviting us into a world of boxes: church and state boxes, religion and politics boxes, my box and God's box. All of your money—what you use for yourself and what you give away—belongs to God. What you do on Monday through

Saturday is just as important as what you do on Sunday. Your politics need to be driven by the depths of your faith, not just your self-preservation instincts. God is at work in what happens in the world outside of the church as he is within the church. The foreigners, the folks outside of our group, even the folks who do not know God—the *them*—can be the means by which God does something remarkable and liberating for us.

I know you like boxes. I like boxes. And they may be good for the Halloween and the Christmas stuff. But when it comes to life—life that matters—they need to go. Life is too complex for them. And besides, what, or may I say, who matters—God—is never going to fit in any box you and I could create. God is God. God gives it all. Just look at Jesus on the cross. And God wants it all.