



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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It is in your hands...

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, Sunday, October 22, 2017
The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost
Based on Matthew 22:15-22*

In 1993, the brilliant African-American writer Toni Morrison, having been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, began her Nobel Prize lecture by telling this story.

"Once upon a time, there was an old woman. Blind but wise.
Or was it an old man? A guru perhaps. Or a griot soothing restless children. I have heard this story, or one exactly like it, in the lore of several cultures.

'Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind. Wise.'

In the version I know, the woman is the daughter of slaves, black, American, and lives alone in a small house outside of town. Her reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question. Among her people she is both the law and its transgression. The honor she is paid and the awe in which she is held reaches beyond her neighborhood to places far away; to the city where the intelligence of rural prophets is the source of much amusement.

One day the woman is visited by some young people who seem to be bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. Their plan is simple; they enter her house and ask the one question the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them. A difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness.

They stand before her, and one of them says, 'Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead.' She does not answer, and the question is repeated. 'Is the bird I am holding living or dead?'

Still she doesn't answer. She is blind and cannot see her visitors, let alone what is in their hand. She does not know their color, gender, or homeland. She only knows their motive.

The old woman's silence is so long, the young people have trouble holding their laughter.

Finally, she speaks and her voice is soft but stern. 'I don't know,' she says. 'I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands.'

Her answer can be taken to mean, If it is dead, you have either found it that way or you have killed it; if it is alive, you can still kill it. Whether it is to stay alive, it is your decision. Whatever the case, it is your responsibility.

For parading their power and her helplessness, the young visitors are reprimanded, told they are responsible not only for the act of mockery, but also for the small bundle of life sacrificed to achieve its aims."¹

¹ Nobel Lectures; From the Literature Laureates, 1986-2006, The New Press, New York, c. 2007 pp.182-183

In today's gospel, we listen as a similar trap is set for Jesus. The Pharisees, in unusual co-operation with their traditional enemies, the Herodians, have set up a theological dilemma for Jesus. It all begins innocently enough, when the Pharisees and the Herodians approach Jesus and say, "Teacher, we know that you're sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth...." The only hint that anything might be wrong at this point is that in Matthew's gospel, only non-believers address Jesus as "teacher." It's a little "early warning device" the gospel writer uses to warn his readers when Jesus is being confronted by someone who doesn't acknowledge his Messianic calling.

But the trap becomes even more obvious as the flattery builds. "We know that you're sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality." Such blatant flattery can only mean one thing: the trap is very near. And here it is: "Tell us, then, what do you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

We've seen it on television a hundred times. It's the classic "gotcha" moment. The microphone shoved into the face of the unsuspecting target. The camera focused tightly.

An impossibly difficult question is asked and the respondent has only a few seconds—no more than a "sound bite"—in which to compose a cogent answer to the trickiest question. In this particular situation, Jesus can look like a proponent of heavy Roman taxation and lose the esteem of the people (and the support of every Jewish faction except the Sadducees) or he can speak as an opponent to Roman taxation and make himself liable to arrest and trial for initiating a rebellion, not unlike one of the Zealots!

How can Jesus answer? Of course, only a mutual desire to see Jesus humiliated could have brought these two groups together. The Herodians, in principle, would want Jesus to give an answer favoring Roman taxation. And the Pharisees, in principle, would want Jesus to give an answer rejecting it. But their common desire is to discredit Jesus, no matter what answer he comes up with. So, how will Jesus respond?

Well, since the questioners are clearly insincere, Jesus is under no obligation to offer a comprehensive answer to guide their "troubled hearts." And so, with true ancient wisdom, he deftly asks his questioners for a denarius, the Roman coin commonly used to pay the poll tax. A typical day's wage. And by this simple action, Jesus says, in effect, "I do not possess the coin used to pay the tribute to Caesar. However, you, who seems so troubled about this matter, do carry and use this coin." And the willingness to use Caesar's money in business transactions is a tacit acceptance of Caesar's imperial system (and, I might add, the healthy business climate it guaranteed). In other words, if you're willing to acknowledge Caesar's sovereignty when it's to your advantage, then it's only fair to pay up when Caesar demands his due.

As biblical scholar John Meier points out, Jesus isn't offering a detailed theory of political obligation here. He's not creating a treatise on church-state relations. He's simply saying, "Give back to Caesar what is rightfully his." And remember, remember always, this rule stands under and is judged by a still greater obligation:

The obligation to recognize the sovereignty of the supreme Sovereign!

The obligation to acknowledge the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords; the Alpha and the Omega, the one who says, "I am the Lord and there is no other. I form light and create darkness"!

So, Jesus makes the warning very clear. They need to be worrying a lot less about what they owe to Caesar and concern themselves a lot more with what they owe to their Creator and Sustainer.

We know whose stamp is on the coin. But whose stamp is on each one of them? Whose stamp is on us? It is in their hands. It is in our hands to choose.

Money means so many different things to people. It's a powerful force. If you think it's "just money," try destroying a dollar bill and pay attention to your own reaction or the reaction of anyone watching you. Jesus addresses money so often in the New Testament because he understands how deeply our treasure affects our spiritual life. Money, like any other kind of power, is not intrinsically evil. It's what we DO with the money that counts. I believe money is sacramental, which is to say, "It's an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." It shows us, and the world around us, what we actually value.

I once heard a news report about a man who had been murdered in a convenience store robbery. The robber shot and killed the man for what amounted to less than fifty-three dollars. As I was listening to the news report, I instinctively reached for my wallet and looked inside. And there they were: three crisp twenty dollar bills, fresh from the ATM. Three small green pieces of paper. Could they buy back a man's life? Could they cost me my own? People have died for less.

How many children have been lost for the price of an inoculation that would have cost only a few dollars?

How many people have died over the price of a ten-dollar smoke alarm?

How many people would be alive if they had clean water to drink or a doctor living in their town?

"All that we have and all that we are comes from God." Over the last several months, I've been beginning more and more prayers with that sentence. I'm not sure where I first heard it, but it resonates deep within me. Perhaps it's a response to feeling particularly fortunate. People of faith call it feeling "blessed," and I guess I really do feel genuinely blessed a good deal of the time. Compared to some, my life's accomplishments have been modest, but frankly, I can't believe I've been so blessed.

I have a family I love and a home nicer than my great grandfather, fresh off the boat from famished Ireland, could have ever possibly imagined. I'm employed in work that is deeply meaningful to me; I'm surrounded by caring friends and remarkably gifted colleagues. And, for some reason, I'm just a little bit uncomfortable talking about it because it's so personal and it can sound like bragging. But I can assure you, none of this, not one bit of it, has come as a result of "my having earned it." As I think I've said here recently, I don't really believe in self-made men or women. All that I have and all that I am comes from God.

Think about the ways you have been blessed! How many rooms can you live in at one time? How many places can you visit? If you spent your life traveling the world, could you see it all? How many things can you enjoy at once? How much is enough? How will you share your blessings with others?

Like the bird in the hands of those children, our future, the future of the Christian faith, the future of this parish is in our hands. Is this church living or dead? Will this church have an impact in our lifetimes which will make New York a genuinely better place to live? We know we can do it. We know we've done so in the past. It's in the history books. It's undisputed. But how will we continue? It's in our hands.

It's up to us to cast our dreams into the pot with everyone else's dreams.

It's in our hands to give our time and our genius to the various ministries of this church.

It's in our hands to pledge generously to St. Bart's and to remember St. Bart's in our wills so it can be a vital, cherished place long after we cease to exist.

It's in our hands to help teach a Sunday School class, to lead a pilgrimage, to start a small group book study, to be part of a mission trip to help repair the broken homes and lives of the people of Texas, Louisiana, Florida, and Puerto Rico or to do whatever it is that we see needs doing around here! Find something and do it! It is in our hands. It is in your hands!

It is in our hands—all of our hands—to give back fairly to God what has always been God's richest and most cherished possession: our love. And it is in our hands to place in the outward and visible signs of our cherished treasures all that we have and all that we are.