

Sermon for October 18, 2020 by The Rev. Lydia Gajdel
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Paul and the Redeemer Episcopal Church

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Mother of us all. Amen.

I remember the day that I realized that my mom had a life that had nothing to do with me. I was in kindergarten and it was a very special day because my mom was dropping me off at school. As she walked me to my classroom, we crossed paths with Mrs. Seckington, our school principal. I was terrified of this woman. All powerful in the eyes of this 5-year-old, she seemed to run my tiny world with an iron fist. And yet, unafraid, my mother walked right up to her like she knew her because, in fact, she did. You see, my mother was also an elementary school principal in the city where I grew up. So I watched in awe as they talked to each other about a work life that consumed so much of my mother's existence and was wholly other from the mom I knew. It was at that point that my little brain began to make a distinction between the Mrs. Gajdel that so many elementary school students knew as their principal and the mom who tucked me in at night.

This was the beginning of an exercise in complexity that humans are required to engage in and do so with varying degrees of success. I had to hold two seemingly incongruent truths at once. My mother could both be my mom and someone else's principal at the same time. She could know other kids who were not my friends. She was a whole person outside of the person who I had spent my life knowing. It blew my mind.

And these types of facts continue to blow our minds well into adulthood. We can see our pets as absolutely perfect and acknowledge the fact that their habit of jumping on people is obnoxious. Our government both maintains the facets of life that keep the day to day relatively manageable and continues to make decisions that are not in the best interest of the people they serve. People can be good and do awful things. Multiple realities can be true at once.

We as Christians profess to know a little something about this, or at least our God knows a whole lot about it. Fully human and fully divine, Jesus stands in the messy middle ground where multiplicity thrives. He surrounds himself with the lowest of the low -- prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners of all stripes -- and promises that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. We confess that death is real and has power and yet cannot overcome us because our God of multiplicity proved that both can be true simultaneously. Christians have committed to a life of holding multiple realities in tension, believing that many things can be real and True at once.

And it is entrenched in this reality that we find Jesus in our gospel story today. The Pharisees and the Herodians, two adversarial groups united in their hatred of Jesus, come to him with one purpose. Entrapment. They meet Jesus among his followers to put him to the test, forcing him to choose between God and the empire. The law and the gospel.

The question is simple. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" If he were to say that it is not lawful to pay taxes for all should be given to God, Jesus would be putting the lives of his followers at risk, for withholding taxes from Rome was punishable by death. On the other hand, if he were to say it was lawful to pay taxes, Jesus would be going against his disciples and friends who lived under the oppressive forces of the emperor, striving to disentangle from his powerful rule.

In the eyes of his tempters, Jesus is left with no answer. Every option before him is betrayal. But his answer surprises them. "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's."

What?

In this story with only terrible options, Jesus picked both of them and somehow got the right answer. Because in the mind of God, these two truths can be held at once. Between binaries and multiplicity, multiplicity is the better answer.

But what does it mean? What is Jesus trying to tell us when he says to give to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God what is God's? In this statement, Jesus stands firmly between the world as it is and the world as it should and will be. As Christians, we don't believe in magic. We don't believe in being woshed away from our problems and off to another land. We believe in a God who came down to earth to be with us in our reality. To join in our humanity and to help us build what is to come, build the kingdom.

As we read the gospels, we are painted a picture of holding these two worlds in tension. What is and what will be. We hear stories of Jesus in the messiest parts of being human, in blood and illness and death. In pain and heartache. We also see Jesus joyfully attending weddings and dinners with friends. We see him living fully in the world as it is and teaching his disciples how to be better followers of God as they live their daily lives.

But we also see glimpses of the world as it should and will be. The glory of Moses and Elijah glowing in splendor on the mountaintop. Moments of prayer where Jesus teaches his followers about connecting to the God who made them. The mystery of life overcoming death again and again and again to lead us back to the splendor of our loving God.

We are taught through the life of Jesus that both can be real and True simultaneously. The pain and complexity of the world as it is and the majesty of the world as it should and will be. And Jesus is calling us in our gospel story today that we must stand directly in the middle. Holding these two truths in tension. The truth of who are. And the truth of who we may become.

So, this is our call. To be faithful to a God of multiplicity. Standing firmly in the messy middle ground. Believing multiple things to real and True at once. The world is filled with heartache and it is also beautiful. We hurt one another and make our lives hard and we are also created in the image and likeness of an all-knowing, all-loving God. This life is devastating and it is so Good. And our God calls us to stand right there. To take it all in. To give to this life all that we have and to labor alongside our God in creating the kingdom that is to come. For we were created for the complexity of this life. And our God is right here, meeting us in it.

Amen.