

"Transforming the World: Politics"
Mark 12:13-17

We are continuing the sermon series about "Transforming the World" and today we look at the need for the transformation of our politics. This is no easy task as I know how divided we are as a nation. I am going to show you a few images from our recent past and you are going to name the political divisions that they represent (phrases for second service)



Colin Kaepernick taking a knee during the national anthem





Guns



Money in politics

Such issues of great importance are so hotly debated right now in our country that it is hard to ignore them. At the same time, it is hard to talk about them in most of our circles

because they bring up such strong feelings within us. According to recent research by the Pew Research Center, Americans are more divided than ever. "Carroll Doherty, from the Pew Center says that, "The fact that Republicans and Democrats differ on these fundamental issues is probably not a surprise, but the magnitude of the difference is striking, and particularly how the differences have grown in recent years and where they've grown," Among both Republicans and Democrats, the share of very unfavorable opinions of the other party has more than doubled in the past 23 years. In 1994, just 16 percent of Democrats said they held very unfavorable opinions of the GOP. Two decades later, that number has practically tripled — to 44 percent. The numbers are almost identical in how Republicans view Democrats, too — 17 percent in 1994 and now 45 percent.

So how do we transform our politics if we can't even talk to each other about them? How does God view our human politics and challenges?

While, I don't claim to know the mind of God, we do have the example of Jesus dealing with divisive political issues. In this week's Gospel story from Mark, Jesus is confronted with a question about the system of taxation of his time. This was especially complex and difficult because it was a hot button issue. The specific tax he was being asked about was that of the tax owed to Rome. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" On the surface, this may seem like a simple question. But the two groups that were asking Jesus this question were divided on this issue themselves. The Pharisees were against paying taxes to the emperor, while the Herodians, the supporters of King Herod, were for paying those taxes. Paying taxes to Rome was a much-hated reminder of oppression from the occupation by a foreign power. We can relate to those feelings from our own American experience with having to pay taxes to England and the unfairness of such a system of taxation. Why pay taxes to a foreign ruler who is not doing much to help the people? The peasants of the people of Israel at that time were impoverished because of the many taxes they had to pay. Jesus was faced with one of those very divisive questions and no matter how he answered, he would have been in trouble with some group and nothing would have been learned from the experience.

Instead of answering the question directly, Jesus engages the question a little more and pushes his questioners to think about their own actions. Now it is important to remember that this was all taking place in the temple in Jerusalem because when Jesus asked for the coin, the denarius, none of the people who were there should have had one with the image of the emperor on it. This was forbidden by law; the law of Moses. One of the most important commandments and teachings of the Jewish faith was a focus on God being the only one to be worshipped and that engraved images of idols were strictly prohibited. In fact, this is one of the reasons they had money changers in the outside courts of the temple. But the leaders who questioned Jesus had in their pocket this idol which they took into the temple of God. This denarius with the head of Caesar Tiberius on it and an inscription that said, "Tiberius, Caesar, worshipful son of the divine Augustus." So, this would have been clearly a way for Jesus to show the hypocrisy and the tension of their time and lives. Morally they knew that they should not be carrying these coins, but practically they needed them to pay their toll taxes.

Then in order to drive the point home, Jesus says to them to return what belongs to the emperor back to the emperor and what belongs to God back to God. This was a radical statement because the people of Israel knew and believed that everything belonged to God. The words of Psalm 24 come to mind, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." In essence Jesus was reminding the people that they belonged to God and that there was no empire or tax system that could detract from that. He was holding up before them the high vision and morals of the kingdom of God where justice and compassion are the norms and not greed and manipulation. Jesus in a way puts this question about tax in its proper context. He reminds the people that their first allegiance is to God and to the ways of God. Yet, Jesus holds this vision in the tension in which it exists with the practical realities of the daily lives of the people. Jesus leaves his audience to struggle with what that statement means in their context and in their time. He does not give them a simple clear-cut answer that allows them to escape the importance of the moral struggle with the issue of paying taxes to Rome. He reminds them of the spiritual values they had to hold up while at the same time living in the messy realities of our world and its systems of domination and control. So, Jesus does two things with his answer. First, he exposes the hypocrisy of those who pretend to stand on high moral ground. Second, he invites them to remember that their ultimate allegiance is to God who owns everything and rules over everything.

This is a tough sell for us because we like clear-cut simple answers for life. We want the transformation of our politics to mean, transforming them into our personal preferences and beliefs. Russell B. Long, who was a senator from Louisiana in the 1960's, wrote, [S-32] "A tax loophole is something that benefits the other guy. If it benefits you, it is tax reform." How do we go about the transformation of our politics? First, as people of faith, we can follow the example of Jesus by admitting that we are responsible for (and even benefit from) some of the dysfunctionality of the system. We have the coin in our pockets. We are part of the system and that our political leaders are a reflection of our own fears and lies. There is no human political system that is pure because we are both saints and sinners at the same time. If you are completely aligned with one political party or system without being willing to question its leaders or actions, then you can be sure your faith is not informing your politics. If you can't talk to your fellow human beings about their experiences and values without feeling that they are your enemies, then you know that the coin in your pocket has been transformed into an idol instead of a tool. Any of you watched the most recent "Jesus Christ Superstar" with John Legend? One of the songs is about Peter's denial. It reflects this reality of our responsibility in forgetting about allegiance to God first. When he was scared for his own safety, Peter conveniently denied Jesus. Let's watch this artistic rendition of the denial:

<https://youtu.be/YZ-O4ffAVfw>

We can say that we would never do such a thing but the truth is that we deny Jesus in many ways: Every time we hold grudges against others, every time we fail to see the image of God in those with whom we disagree, every time we shun those who are in need, every time we put our comfort first before the needs of those who are hurting, every time we believe that we are less than God's image in the world, and every time

we believe in the cynicism of our age, we deny Jesus. We must come to our political systems and activism from a place of humility and awareness that we need God's grace because our egos often mislead us.

The second way we can transform our politics is by engage them from a higher perspective to allow the values of the kingdom of God to inform and guide our politics. People of faith need to be faithful in studying the Bible and praying together about the difficult issues of our day to seek God's guidance. Allowing room for difference and for struggle is important because that is how God transforms us. This is not an easy thing. Just like Jesus did not give the people a simple answer but helped them get their perspective on what God would want, we are invited to engage the issues of our day with all their complexities and their connections to our emotional programs for happiness: Power, security, and affection. Marcus Borg writes about this saying "Thus this text offers little or no guidance for tax season. It neither claims taxation is legitimate nor gives aid to anti-tax activists. It neither counsels universal acceptance of political authority nor its reverse. But it does raise the provocative and still relevant question: What belongs to God, and what belongs to Caesar? **And what if Caesar is Hitler, or apartheid, or communism, or global capitalism?** What is to be the attitude of Christians toward domination systems, whether ancient or modern?"

What do we mean when we say that we belong to God and that all of life is a gift from God? How does answering this question affect our politics? How would we engage our politics from a place of humility and an openness to God's perspective?

There is a story about a man who made a vow to sell his house when all his problems are solved and give all the money to the poor. When this comes to pass, he gets cold feet and doesn't want to part with all his money. So, he sells his house for one silver coin. But with the house comes a cat that costs 10,000 silver coins. A buyer is found. House and cat are sold. The man gives the one silver coin to the poor and pockets the 10,000 silver coins. This the challenge of living by the politics of faith. May we have the courage and commitment to seek the transformation of our world's politics by putting God's politics first! Amen.