

Beyond Binary Trap

Matthew 22:15-22

Lord, Have Mercy on Us

Whether humans are born good or evil has been debated by philosophers for centuries. What do you think? Are we born good or evil? I personally believe that we are essentially born good because we are created in God's image, but at the same time, we are born into a world, which is already tainted with sin and evil, so no one can escape the destructive influence of evil and sin. Whether we realize it or not, we are affected by evil and sin. So as Jesus said, "No one is good—except God alone." Unfortunately, evil seems to win when we hear the news. Even as the Ukraine war continues, a war between Hamas and Israel erupted. Innocent civilians and children are dying. Thousands of people were wounded, and millions lost their homes and access to food, water and electricity essential to their survival. Witnessing the brutal reality of war, violence and evil, we feel sorrow and helplessness weighing heavily on our hearts and souls. In the face of the sheer madness of war and hatred, I cannot say anything but pray, "Lord, have mercy on us."

Sadly, instead of promoting peace and reconciliation, News media and politicians are already taking sides, asking, "Are you pro-Israel or pro-Palestine?" Most Western news media describe Hamas and Palestinians as "Islamic terrorists" who mercilessly kill innocent civilians and portray Israel as an innocent victim. However, a closer look at the history of both states reveals that it's impossible to depict one as an innocent victim and the other as a demonic aggressor. In this conflicted situation, people are often preoccupied with binary thinking like "This is war, and there is no neutral ground. If you're not for us, you're against us." But there is no peace if people see the world only with a black-and-white lens. Christians are called to walk a narrow path, a path between a rock and a hard place.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

I believe that Jesus embodied a life living in-between a rock and a hard place. As we all know, Jesus' teaching and actions did not fit well with the traditional teachings of dominant religious parties nor did they serve the interests of political parties of his time. So, Jesus often clashed with them and of course, they didn't like him. On one hand, the Pharisees disliked Jesus because he spent time with social outcasts. Simply sitting at the same table with these unclean people was considered a violation of purity laws, but Jesus often hosted parties with them. So, the Pharisees didn't like Jesus. On the other hand, the Herodians disapproved of Jesus because he proclaimed the coming kingdom of God, which sounded like a political challenge to the Roman Empire. Thus, the Herodians had an aversion to Jesus. While these two groups typically opposed each other, they had one thing in common: neither of them liked Jesus. In their joint effort to silence Jesus, the Pharisees and Herodians came to Jesus and asked, "Teacher! Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" (v. 17) In their minds, this either-or question was a perfect trap for Jesus because no matter which sides he chose, he would be in trouble.

Just like in our world today, taxes were a big deal in the time of Jesus, especially those imposed by the Romans. Roman taxes were really heavy, and most folks felt the weight of that burden. Many of the people who followed Jesus also struggled with these high taxes. But beyond the financial strain, paying taxes to the emperor was a theological issue. You see, the Israelites believed that their land, Israel, belonged only to God, who they saw as the true ruler. However, the Roman emperor came along, claimed their land, and declared itself the owner. For the Jewish people, this was a problem. They saw the emperor as an illegitimate ruler of their land. So, they

wrestled with the question of whether paying taxes to the emperor was an act of disobedience to God. It was a matter of loyalty and faith for them.

The question about taxes was a tricky one for Jesus. If he had said, "You must pay your taxes," he would upset the pious Jews who believed in God's sovereignty over their land and disappoint many of his humble followers struggling to make ends meet. On the other hand, if Jesus had encouraged people to refuse paying taxes to the Roman emperor, it wouldn't have taken long for the Herodians to have him arrested. It was a cleverly set "either-or" trap they laid for him.

A Trap of Binary Thinking

In our divisive world, we often face this either-or trap. For instance, whose side are you on in this Israel and Palestine conflict? The majority of Americans are pro-Israel and the U.S. government claimed that it stands with Israel. The U.S. government sent more arms and military supplies to Israel before the expected Gaza invasion. Hamas has certainly committed unspeakable atrocity killing and kidnapping innocent civilians and so has the Israel authority. According to Amnesty International, Israel's apartheid against Palestinians is a cruel system of domination and crime against humanity.¹ Including forced evictions, arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment. Gaza is called "the world's largest open-air prison." Whose side are you on? But taking a side is no solution for either of them. As the conflict between Israel and Hamas continues, both antisemitism and anti-Palestinian attacks are on the rise in the United States and around the world. On October 16, a six-year-old Palestinian-American boy was stabbed 26 times for being Muslim and died, while his mother was seriously wounded. Also, reports of antisemitic incidents have spiked in the U.S. Both Jewish and Muslim Americans fear the rise in hate crimes amid the Israel-Hamas war. Binary thinking doesn't help. We need to move beyond black-and-white thinking.

As the Pharisees attempted to ensnare Jesus with a binary question, He reframed the issue by requesting to inspect the coin used for taxes. Jesus asked, "Do you have a coin? Let me see it." They promptly handed him a silver coin. In Jesus's time, these silver coins bore the image of Caesar, accompanied by the words, "The Divine Caesar," asserting the emperor's divinity.

When the Pharisees presented this silver coin, Jesus inquired, "Whose image and inscription is this?" Their response was, "Caesar's." To this, Jesus declared, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." Give to God the things that are God's. What is the logical next question after that? We need to do our divvying up work. What are God's things and what are not? We have to determine what is sacred and what is mundane. As we do our divvying up work, sooner or later we are bound to ask the question: "What isn't God's?" Yes. Jesus didn't intend to give Caesar the same status as God, but Jesus wants us to take a different look.

Be an Instrument for peace

Rev. Dr. Derek Weber said, "Everything is sacred and fit for use in the service of God. Everything, starting with us and everyone around us, belongs to God and therefore it is a part of our calling to surrender ourselves to God."² We all know what God wants. "to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) Love God with your whole

¹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2022/02/israels-system-of-apartheid/>

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/the-end-in-sight/twenty-first-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/twenty-first-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-preaching-notes>

being and love your neighbors as yourselves! From this, we know that hatred and violence can never be the way we should walk. Peace with justice and reconciliation should be the guiding beacons for our lives. Instead of simply siding with one party, we need to find an in-between space in which we can have an honest and courageous conversation with one another and God and find God's calling for peace and reconciliation through compassion and love.

While human hatred and violence have created the most destructive evil, war, there is still a light of hope, maybe dim and small, but there is still light. We often assume that the Palestinians are Muslim but that's not true. There are Palestinian Christians and the orthodox churches in Gaza. When an Israeli air raid destroyed many people's homes, The Church of Saint Porphyrius, Gaza's oldest church, opened the church building and provided shelter for hundreds of civilians, Muslims, Christians and across all faiths.³ One refugee said, "Families of different religions are together under the church's roofs amid the trauma of the bombing is in itself an act of resistance."⁴ Compassion for innocent people suffering on all sides of this war is a key to open a narrow path for peace.

[ppt] Life can grow between a rock and a hard place. A morning glory seed from last fall was carried by the wind and took root in the small patches of soil between the asphalt driveway and the concrete wall of the house's foundation, and it bloomed. Without any help, these morning glory flowers grew on their own, displaying their grandeur. Even in the seemingly lifeless gaps between the asphalt and the concrete wall, life found its place and grew. As they grow, the hard surfaces are cracked and opened for more life. I believe the church should be this in-between space for life.

What can we do for our divisive world? First pray with your whole hearts for peace with justice in Israel and Palestine, Ukraine and Russia, The United States and the whole world. Asbury UMC has been pretty good at this. We continue to sing "Let there be peace on earth" as our sincere prayer since the beginning of Ukraine war. Be persistent in praying for peace with justice! Also, accept Jesus as your Lord and give him your whole heart. Instead of blindly following your political position, step back and reflect on the issues from other perspectives including your faith tradition. No one has the ultimate truth so open your hearts and listen to others' voices. Be a friend to those who are different from you. Through those small steps, we can overcome the binary trap of the world and be instruments for peace. Amen.

³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/16/war-knows-no-religion-gazas-oldest-church-shelters-muslims-christians>

⁴ Ibid.