

“Playing with the Powers”
Sermon from Matthew 17:24-27
Given Sunday, October 24, 2021
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
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When they entered Capernaum, the collectors of the Temple tax approached Peter and asked, “Doesn’t your Teacher pay the Temple tax?”

Peter responded, “Of course he does.”

When Peter came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first: “Simon, what is your opinion? Do the rulers of the world collect taxes or levies from their own children, or from foreigners?”

Simon replied, “From foreigners.”

Jesus observed, “Then their children are exempt. But so we don’t offend these people, go to the lake and cast a line, and catch the first fish that bites. Open its mouth and you will find a coin worth twice the Temple tax. Take it and give it to them for both you and me.”

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From just about the same place as that story, but nearly two thousand years later, we get this story:

A young man was in the marketplace when a group of soldiers seized him and began to lead him away. But a woman who was shopping nearby saw what was happening and came running, screaming, crying. She threw herself at the soldiers and

shouted at them, telling them to let her son go; telling them he hadn't done anything wrong; telling them he was just accompanying her, a woman, who couldn't be out alone, while she did her shopping for food for their family.

She grabbed the boy's arm, wrapping herself around him and pulling at him until she could yank him free from the soldier's grip. Eventually the men gave up, they let him go, and the woman threaded her fingers through the boy's and as they were walking away hand in hand, a bystander watched the woman blink away her tears, heard her say to the boy, "Now which family are you from, dear?"

It's a joke that circulated heavily during the uprising in Palestine that began in the 1980s - a time when ethnologist Sharif Kanaana says popular jokes reflected a sense of cohesion, and shared purpose - here, when Palestinians were more united in their opposition to Israeli occupation. You can judge popular morale, political temperament, he writes, by paying attention to the jokes people tell.

Every joke, said George Orwell, is a tiny revolution.

When Mary is pregnant, she sings a song of revolution, a song from her tradition, a song that Hannah, a mother from the Hebrew Bible, sang before her - a song that promises that with this birth, God is doing big things in the world: a great reversal is happening - God is bringing the mighty down from their

thrones, and lifting up the humble; God is filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty.

Is every child, also, a tiny revolution?

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In an essay he wrote in 1945, George Orwell tells us, “A thing is funny when—in some way that is not actually offensive or frightening—it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution. If you had to define humour in a single phrase, you might define it as dignity sitting on a tack. Whatever destroys dignity, and brings down the mighty from their seats, preferably with a bump, is funny. And the bigger the fall, the bigger the joke.”

Some commentators will say that our scripture for today is a story about Jesus advocating the importance of paying taxes. That in this story, Jesus is saying, “You’re a fisherman, Peter. Go to work, and earn the money you need to pay taxes. It’s the right thing to do.”

I mean, maybe.

But you hear the joke in there, right?

I’ve never been, but some of our resident fishermen around here tell me the joke starts with Jesus telling Peter, “Just go to the lake and catch a fish,” like it’s that easy.

But there's more... after that, Jesus kind of assumes the posture of everybody's favorite grandpa, right? The one who crouches down, to get eye-level with the kid, and says, "hey, wait a minute, I think you've got something, right -" and then reaches behind the kid's ear and pulls out a quarter.

Isn't this an ancient version of that scene? Ending, you know, the way that scene always does, with the grandpa handing over the quarter to the kid, and telling the kid to go pay his taxes?

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The tax in this story is a temple tax - a tax collected every year between what would be March 15 and March 25 on our calendar, from every Jewish male twenty years old or older. The money was needed to purchase sacrifices of lamb, wine, flour, oil, to buy the incense that was burned daily, to purchase hangings to make the temple beautiful, to replace the priest's robes, which I was surprised to learn, wore out frequently.

The tax is half a shekel - there's no coin in that amount, so people often paid together, like Jesus is asking Peter to do here for the both of them. And it's obligatory, at least in theory, meaning if you don't pay on time, the authorities could come and seize your wages, your property, your goods. And the religious authorities are sometimes conflated with the political authorities, which complicates people's allegiance.

It wasn't a tremendous amount of money - about two days worth of work in that time - but there were other questions surrounding it, like what Jesus raises here.

Questions like: Who has authority over us, really? Are we free? Are we God's children? Is everyone a child of God? So, what do we owe, and to whom do we owe it?

The questions are the same and different once the gospel author is actually recording this story - some 20 or 30 years after the Temple was destroyed. If comedy equals tragedy plus time, as some have said, maybe this is Matthew's attempt at healing what would have been so incredibly painful. Or maybe the author is retelling this old joke as a way of raising the issues again:

How do we know that we are free in God, even while our lived reality is as an occupied people? How do we resist the powers that would assert themselves as gods over us, that would deny our humanity?

One answer has always been: we laugh at them. Lisa Bhungalia is a researcher in Palestine looking at encounters that protesting youth have with the authorities there. She notes that in photos and videos, while the youth are being caught, arrested, even while violence is being committed against them, they're smiling. They're laughing.

And she says, “To laugh in the face of power is not to say: *I oppose you* - rather it is to say: *your power has no authority over me*.” Refusal, she says, denies authority presumed and in so doing, it reconfigures the relationships - who is wielding power? Whom is it wielded on behalf of, or against? To challenge the power is not to deny that it exists, she says, not to say it isn’t real; to laugh in the face of power is to assert that other political orders and possibilities exist. It is to reclaim humanity in a world that would deny it.

Jesus says to Peter, “Oh, we’ll pay the tax. Sure. We don’t want to offend anyone. But listen here: we are children of God. We do not belong to them. So... let’s play with them a little bit.”

To laugh is to reclaim your delight, to assert again to the world that it was created in and for delight, for plucking coins from kids’ ears or fishes’ mouths. Sometimes that’s just for fun. And sometimes it’s for pretty serious business.

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No one wants to talk about sexual assault. There are no circumstances under which it’s funny. And the aftermath of it - survivors trying to navigate a system where perpetrators can be held accountable - that can be infuriating. It can be re-traumatizing. It can be ridiculous.

And ridiculous might be that place where a joke can make a change.

So Amanda Nguyen, a survivor of sexual assault who wanted things to be different for other survivors, she contacted an independent comedy studio in Los Angeles called Funny or Die, and they helped her make a series of videos, like one that's an infomercial for a Sexual Assault Survivor's Utility Belt.

The scene opens with a woman inviting a co-worker out to a concert that evening, and the co-worker declines, saying she has to go to the police station and beg them not to destroy the evidence of her assault, since it's been six months, and the law made that common practice.

The other woman empathizes, and then opens her jacket to reveal a utility belt, pockets chock-full of tools, like a six-month timer to remind a survivor of that deadline, a poncho for when the evidence gets thrown out anyway and the survivor has to go fishing through the trash for it, a giant folder with a paper copy of the legislation surrounding assault in all fifty states, because they're all different. The other woman asks if maybe there's a counselor tucked in one of pockets, someone she could talk to about understanding what's happened, and beginning to heal from it, and the first woman apologizes, says no, but does hand over some dried apricots, because, when all else fails: snacks.

"The belts are selling out," the infomercial warns, "so order yours today. These belts are the second best thing to meaningful legislation."

It's terrible. It's funny only in that way that it exposes something terrible, makes you wonder how such a thing even exists, how it ever came to be, how anyone could've thought... and that's what it did. Funny or Die made several videos in this campaign, and one of them was attached to the Sexual Assault Survivor's Right Act when that bill was sent to Congress. It was also released to the public, and within days a petition that accompanied it had generated hundreds of thousands of signatures, asking for meaningful legislation to be passed. And it was, unanimously, in both the Senate and the House, in just a few months, and signed into law by the President a few months after that, in 2016. And now there is more protection, more dignity, more justice, for those who have endured the unimaginable.

Every joke is a tiny revolution. Let's play that way.

Amen.