
Allegiance to Peace
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
October 23, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Psalm 119:137-144 and Matthew 22:15-22

Before I begin, I need to show you something, and I when you see what I'm going to show you I want you to yell out the first thing that comes to your mind. Actually, I supposed I should show this on the screen, or you'll never see it.

[image: a nickel]

Well, that's interesting. Not one of you yelled out "hypocrite"! So why on earth did Jesus call the pharisees "hypocrites" when all they did was show Jesus a coin? Our gospel story today is one of those stories where we feel like someone turned over 2 pages at once, or perhaps a translator skipped a piece of the story. Why did Jesus get so upset so fast when he saw a coin?

Well, in a sense part of the story is missing to our modern ears. The original audience would have understood the unwritten assumptions, but we have to add them in. To understand the meaning of this story, we need to remember who these people called "Pharisees" and "Herodians" were. Because they are the ones interrogating Jesus. We also need to recall a few details about the Roman Empire.

[image: roman empire]

The Roman Empire is fascinating. I'm no expert, but I do know that the Roman Empire wanted dominance. But, Rome was very strategic. Sometimes it was better (from Rome's point of view) to slaughter people and take over their lands. Other times, it was better (from Rome's point of view) to form partnerships and work with the local inhabitants. While extracting wealth and resources of course. If you do not kill the local people then they can keep working and producing goods, right?

And in Palestine, at the time of Jesus, Rome was trying to work with the locals without the need for a military conquest. In fact they were quite accommodating to a number of social groups, including Jewish groups. One accommodation that Rome had made to Jewish groups was that Rome created special coins that - unlike the standard

Roman denarius

[image: roman denarius]

did not have an image of the Emperor on them. Jewish laws prohibited the use of human images, so normal coins offended Jewish sensibilities. Moreover, the words on the coins could have been trigger words. The words on the Roman coin said, “Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus.”

So in Palestine, in Jesus's day, Rome was trying to extract wealth through partnerships rather than slaughter. Meanwhile, some of the Jewish groups were very nationalistic. These groups wanted to use military force to eject the Romans altogether. When these Jewish groups would rise up, then Rome would respond with military force and restore order. The revolt in 66 AD which resulted in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem is one example of that.

[image: peoples front of judea]

The “Pharisees” were one of these nationalistic groups. They wanted to create their own independent Jewish state. Herodians, on the other hand, supported Herod. Herodians were Jewish people who were content to live in harmony with Rome. These Jewish people supported the idea of partnerships with Rome. So - Pharisees wanted to eject Rome and Herodians wanted to work with Rome. Pharisees and Herodians were both Jewish groups, but they did not see eye-to-eye. But both groups shared a fear and dislike of Jesus. They saw Jesus as a mysterious itinerant preacher who was gaining too much popularity for their comfort.

[image: give to caesar or give to god?]

And both of these groups were present when Jesus was asked, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” If Jesus had simply said “Yes”, he would have annoyed the Pharisees. If he had said “No”, he would have annoyed the Herodians. The question to Jesus is really an offer for Jesus to commit political suicide and to irritate Jesus’s followers, regardless of which side they were on. The question to Jesus was really about his allegiance.

[image: hypocrisy]

The Pharisees, who were not only nationalistic but also religious zealots, should

have followed their own rules. They should only have been using the special Jewish coins. But the special coins had a more limited market, and were therefore less tradable and consequently less valuable. In the story, the Pharisees had no problem producing a real Roman denarius for Jesus to inspect. Which is why Jesus called them hypocrites. And so the story is not so much about the question of paying taxes. The story is really about allegiance. Jesus was effectively being asked which group he belonged to. Was Jesus a hater of Rome or someone who wanted to work with Rome. But Jesus does not fit with either position.

You know, if you read the entire New Testament we never get the impression that Jesus cared much about the so-called oppression of the Jewish people by Rome. Jesus does not preach about that at all. Instead, Jesus speaks of something more important. The Pharisees wanted to put Jesus into a political box. But Jesus's beliefs transcended the political box that his opponents were trying to force him into. Does that remind you of anybody else?

[show image of Colin Kaepernick - head shot]

Do you know this person?

[show image of Colin Kaepernick - full shot]

How about now?

Colin Kaepernick - as you probably know - used to be known as a quarterback. But today, he is mainly known for not standing up when the national anthem was played before NFL football games. Kaepernick made it very clear that he was not standing for the anthem as a protest to the fact that people of colour are systematically discriminated against in the US. And in particular, as a response to the large number of unarmed black people killed by police in the US every year.

Kaepernick actually did this for a few games before anyone noticed - or cared. But when they did notice, our media exploded. Trump was famously quoted as saying, "I think it's a terrible thing, and you know, maybe he should find a country that works better for him". Which was more than a bit ironic given that Trump outsourced his own products to factories abroad. But Kaepernick's response was, "[Trump] always says, 'make America great again'. Well, America has never been great for people of colour.

And that's something that needs to be addressed. Let's make America great for the first time."

Since then the whole debate has only been about the *nature* of the protest that Kaepernick made. Is it disrespectful to the flag to not stand? Should football player contracts be changed so that they are forced to stand? Our media does not actually want any discussion about racism - which the message Kaepernick was trying to bring up.

To quote Wade Davis, a former professional football player, "The actual point of protest is to disrupt how we move about our daily lives. What Kaepernick did was disrupt one of our most treasured sports. Whether you agree with his tactics or not is one type of conversation. The larger conversation is what he is protesting about. The fact that so many [people] do not want to have that specific conversation speaks to the fact that they know what is happening in America is beyond tragic."

[image: kaepernick and jesus]

I think that Kaepernick and Jesus have the same problem - as well as the same hair. They both care about something very important. But they are both surrounded by people who care more about the *way* a message is presented than the message itself. Perhaps people like to focus on the way a message is presented to avoid dealing with the truth in the actual message. And both Jesus and Kaepernick give us difficult messages that we might rather ignore.

[image world peace]

Speaking of difficult messages, today is Peace Sunday. Peace Sunday always sounds so cool. I mean, we imagine that all people obviously want peace. Therefore, at some point, world peace will be achieved. But I'm not sure I believe any longer that all people want peace. Because people seem to only want peace on their own terms. And if we want peace on our own terms, then we do not want peace at all. We all have our own allegiances that take priority over peace. We see this everywhere. We want peace - after someone else gives up their autonomy. We want peace - after that country becomes democratic. We want peace - after those heathens become Christian. We want peace - after you surrender your nuclear weapons, while we hold on to ours. We want peace in the Ukraine, but only after Putin has been punished. You know the drill.

So I usually dread speaking about peace, because we all carry a lot of cognitive dissonance around peace. But I do want to talk about it today. For one thing, it's one of the few topics that Darrell and I disagree about. And that is cool in itself. Before I share my own ideas, I want to warm you up with some words from Clare Daly, a European Member of Parliament. My own words will be tame compared to hers.

[image: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uUc32EKhNs>]

Does humanity really want to live in peace? Let me give you a few examples where it seems that we do not. Consider our Psalm today. And thank you for reading it Terry, because I did not want to read those racist words myself.

[image: Psalm 119:139]

Consider verse 139, "My zeal consumes me because my foes forget your words". But why on earth would the author of that Psalm expect their foe to respect Jewish scripture? The context of almost all of the psalms is unclear. But whoever these "foe" are, they were not Jewish. Why would the author expect non-Jewish people to follow Jewish scripture? And yet, the author of this psalm uses that non-compliance to justify their zeal.

And that is not just what happened in the past. In our modern world, we often expect compliance. There are countless examples of this. For example, from April 29 this year.

[image: US punishes countries that don't agree with them]

"US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken has said the US is considering taking 'action' against countries that are not enforcing its Ukraine-related sanctions against Russia"¹ The US has every right to put sanctions on Russia itself. But to expect compliance from other democratic countries is inappropriate. Surely those countries are allowed to think for themselves. The US threats to punish countries that do not agree with them is completely un-democratic. In fact, it is anti-democratic. It is the exact opposite of how democracy works. And yet at the same time, our media is telling us that for the sake of democracy, we need to destroy Russia.

Why is this? In part it is because human being can so easily be triggered and trapped into following racist ideologies. Like, "The west is good. Russia is evil, got it?"

¹ <https://www.prokerala.com/news/articles/a1273060.html>

Russia-phobia is a form of racism! And I thought that we were opposed to racism. The Russian invasion of the Ukraine is evil. But Russia-phobia against all Russian citizens is racist. Hating Putin is fine. But most Russian citizens are ordinary people just like us. And yet, we have been brain-washed into thinking that every single Russian citizen is evil. And we blindly swallow it all as “good citizens”. That is why we do not have peace in our time. We do not have peace in our time because people like us refuse to look beyond the paper-thin narratives that we are force-fed by our governments and media. Narratives that we know are wrong ... if we just thought about it ourselves for 5 seconds.

[image: Martin Luther king jr. on silence]

For example, after 9/11 many Canadians had no problem believing that every single Muslim was a terrorist. That’s completely insane, as well as completely racist. Approximately 1/3 of the people living on earth are Muslim. If they are all terrorists then they are not very good at it. If all Muslims are terrorists then planes should be falling out of the sky every 5 minutes. Obviously, MOST Muslims are not terrorists. And most Muslims, and Russians, are people just like us. People that could be our friends if we just got into relationship with them.

But we as “good citizens” keep falling into the ideological traps that are intentionally put in front of us. Racism is so hard to root out, because it keeps reappearing - sometimes in the same form, and sometimes in other forms. But it is very popular. And it prevents us from finding peace in our time.

[image: rings of power]

How many of us are watching the Amazon series “Rings of Power” now? This series is a prequel to the Lord of the Rings stories. Marjorie and I are enjoying the series - as entertainment. But at the same, time, the series strongly reinforces fear, and the need for racism in order to protect our way of life. The story is a battle between a number of groups, but the principles groups (that I can figure out - the story is a bit convoluted) are

[image: ROP harfoot, elves, dwarfs, orcs]

Dwarfs, Elves, Harfoot, and Orcs. The series reminds us all - in very subtle ways - that WE need to protect ourselves from THEM. The series feeds the racist narrative that allows wars to flourish today. And here in the west, we call that entertainment. We are

aghast that the Romans used to be entertained by slaughter in the colosseum, but I'm not sure we have evolved very far beyond that ourselves.

When our first allegiance is to people like us - in other words to a racist ideology, then we will never have world peace. Perhaps the only way to achieve world peace is to make our first allegiance to peace itself. When peace is a secondary allegiance, well, you already see what we get from that. We get continuous war.

[image: allegiance to peace]

I want to close with some words about World Peace from Jesus. Unfortunately, I couldn't find any. Today, when we say "World Peace" we mean an end to global conflict.

So if I tried to preach now that Jesus wanted World Peace (in the way we understand the term today) I would be trying to stuff Jesus into a political box myself. And that would be just like the pharisees did in our reading today. And I will not do that. Instead, I will offer that Jesus was very interested in peace - but a different kind of peace. Jesus didn't seem to care at all about the Romans. Jesus did not feel that political or economic liberation mattered. Jesus wanted to share the peace of God and have people live lives not dominated by fear and its sibling, hatred. Jesus worked for inner personal peace, not political peace. And if ordinary people like us around the world would embrace that peace, we would have global peace.

Jesus said, "My peace I give to you. My peace I leave with you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled. And do not let them be afraid."

Amen.