

Proper 24
Year A 2017

Matthew 22:15-22

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

In the name of God, creator, redeemer and giver of life.

Amen.

Last weekend, Elizabeth, Melissa, Alan, baby Rachel bug, and our delegates Bill Calkins, Maryella Morley, Mike Ogborn and I attended Diocesan Convention in Grand Junction.

The theme of this year's convention was
Reconciliation and Grace:
Embracing the World in Love.

We heard from a number of dynamic and inspiring guests, Former Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori; Dr. Samuel Mampunza of the Democratic Republic of Congo; The Rev. Tawana Davis and Rev. Dr. Dawn Duval, of Soul 2 Soul Sisters; and Rev. Mark Stevenson and Allison Duvall of Episcopal Migration Ministries.

All stimulating speakers
deeply involved in their own calls to ministry
on behalf of the poor, the voiceless, and the invisible.

Bishop Katherine directed us to
get out and get engaged in the world around us.

Dr. Samuel Mampunza brought us information from his home, the Democratic Republic of the Congo where 64% of the population live on \$2 a day or less. That's over 49 million women, men and children.

Dr. Mampunza is the Dean of the Medical School at the University of Kinshasa as well as Vice President of Congo's Protestant University.

Dr. Samuel educated us to the fact that 27% of the children in DCR are not in school.

He also invited us to guess his age, 62, so that he could tell us that the average life expectancy in DCR is 41.

He shared with us the inspiring and courageous story of his and his family's decision to leave Brussels where he had a medical career and where his children were thriving in school, to follow a call from God to return to DCR, their homeland.

Dr. Samuel heeded his call from God, returned to DCR, and opened the Medical School at Protestant University.

At this medical school citizens of DCR are trained as doctors to address the needs of the citizens of DCR where the doctor/patient ratio is 11 physicians for 100,000 people.

He also informed us of the dangerous political situation in DCR and how he and others were responding and hoping that outside countries would act to stop the abuses of President Joseph Kabila.

We heard from The Reverend Tawana Davis and The Reverend Dr. Dawn Duval of Soul 2 Soul Sisters who led us through the wilderness sharing experiences and lessons learned relating to racial justice work.

They shared with us their stories of wilderness moments which have led them to pursue their work through Soul 2 Soul in engaging predominantly white congregations or organizations in an examination of racial justice and systemic racism.

This was sobering and difficult work.

And for some of our brothers and sisters in Christ, work they found too difficult to engage with.

The Reverend Mark Stevenson and Allison Duvall of Episcopal Migration Ministries provided an update of the state of refugees worldwide and changes in the United States' immigration policies under the new administration.

We learned that there are currently 22.5 million refugees, over half of whom are children.

If you add asylum seekers and displaced persons that number rises to 65.6 million.

Does anyone want to guess the average number of years that a refugee stays in their first place of refuge outside of their native country?

17 years.

That's an entire childhood of living in a refugee camp or worse.

We also learned that EMM is one of only 9 organizations that work with the government to resettle refugees in this country. of those 9 organizations, 6 are faith based.

Work that provides a new beginning for the least among us.

All of these presenter's stories and work are testament to politics and faith intertwined which is at the heart of today's gospel message.

As I was taking in all of this information during convention I was working with today's gospel.

A section of scripture which, over time, many have used to justify the concept of a separation of politics and religion.

Jesus is purported to have said:

Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.

Commentator Lance Pape states:

Some people point to this passage as proof that God and politics should be kept separate – that things like taxes have absolutely nothing to do with one's theological commitments.

Others say that this story proves that religion is a matter of the heart, and that Jesus doesn't really care about mundane things like what you do with your money.

And some have cited this passage as proof that Jesus taught that the law is the law, and our duty as Christians is to support the government no matter what.

Pape goes on to state that all three of these interpretations are dubious.

Now as the gospel passage goes,
a group Pharisees and Herodians
appear to be trying to catch Jesus up
in what they believe will be his downfall.

So they question him in such a way as
to try to set him publicly at odds with
the power structure of the day, the emperor.

But Jesus attempts to put his accusers at odds
with those he stands in solidarity with,
the poor, the voiceless and the powerless.

So Jesus, asks to see the coin
used to pay for the Roman census tax,
which was particularly burdensome to the poor.

They bring forth the coin and show it to Jesus.

Now, Jesus didn't just pull a coin out of his robe
to wave in the face of his opponents.

You see, Jesus didn't walk around with a pocket full of coins.

Only the elite and the powerful could reach
into their pockets and produce coins.

A fact surely not lost on those in Jesus' group.

So where do I find myself in this story?

Where does this community see itself in this story?

Well, I must reconcile the fact that
I can pull a coin from my pocket;
and I am able to live well above \$2 a day;
I am not discriminated against because of my ethnicity;
and I most likely will never have to flee my home or my country as a result
of war or persecution.

And, I firmly believe, my baptismal vows
To seek and serve Christ in all persons;
To love my neighbor as myself;
To strive for justice and peace among all people;
And to respect the dignity of every human being.

Likewise, I firmly believe my ordination vow
to serve all people, particularly the poor,
the weak, the sick,
and the lonely.

This is my political platform.

The politics to which I pledge my whole heart and being
the one true and living God,
my sovereign and supreme authority.

In times such as these,
It's a liminal space to occupy
Residing with the haves
And yet walking in solidarity with the have nots.

Being provided a space at the table of
The decision makers, the haves,
and yet deeply committed to
giving voice to the invisible, the have nots,
who have no place at the table
but who will bear the burdens of the decisions made.

This my brothers and sisters in Christ
is where we reside in this time and place.

So how do we, as followers of the Christ,
learn to engage with the power structures,
the governing authorities, the haves,
and still maintain our identity as people made in the image of God
who have pledged our lives to the call of Christ?

How do we hold fast to the knowledge that
God is our sovereign, our supreme authority,
in all things?

We might begin by standing in solidarity
with the unsheltered, the addicted,
our LGBTQ brothers and sisters,
and those suffering from mental health issues
whose voices are infrequently brought to the
table where those gathered make decisions
which are so often unduly burdensome.

We might stand in solidarity with our
undocumented neighbors
who are voiceless and powerless.

We can use our voices to call to account
those in power to craft a humane set of laws
which cease to demonize and destroy.

As a community we can begin a wilderness journey
to examine issues of racial justice and systemic racism.

We can use our voices to call this administration
to account to remember the fundamental
belief in the formation of our nation to be
a place of opportunity and safety for all citizens.

We can demand that our government uphold
the founding principle of our nation
that the shores of this country are open to those who
need shelter from oppression and abuse.

None of this will be easy.

It will be discomfoting,
we will anger some,
we most likely will inadvertently offend some.

But we will be proclaiming the Kingdom of
God is here and now
and we that we are residents of that Kingdom.

We will be proclaiming our
belief that God is the God of all.

In the words of commentator Karoline Lewis:

Ploys to persuade us of power without empathy are everywhere.

Cons to convince us that control without compassion are just an encounter away.

Ruses to snare us into thinking that God's sovereignty is in question are constant.

Yet, at the heart of Jesus' response to those who would test his loyalties

is a rather simple but subversive sermon –

God's sovereignty is not a choice but a truth.

It is not a question of loyalty, but a statement of reality.

Dare we step forth and proclaim that truth?