

Pentecost 19, proper 24. October 19, 2014. Matthew 22: 15-22 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

In many ways my early childhood was “normal.” In my first seven years I have happy memories: vacations in South-West England, playing soccer with dad in the park, watching mom cook. From time to time there were fights - usually about money (which is one of the two great causes of marital strife) - it’s no accident, I think, that Jesus talked about money more than anything else in his public ministry. Like every human being, each of my parents had “issues.” There were some odd things, of too, like when my dad mentioned that he’d accepted a brief assignment for his company a day’s drive away, to get “a breather.” That didn’t mean much to a six-year old. Or when mom seemed to have stopped talking to dad. Later I recognized these as signs of stress, but only later. As far as I knew we were a traditional 1950’s family.

Then something changed: through no fault of his own my father lost his job, and struggled to find another in his field. Suddenly he wasn’t around in the evenings; he often came home drunk. My mother’s behavior changed too - she yelled and cried a lot more, played the “don’t mind me, I’ll just sit here in the dark” martyr. A lot more, louder arguments. Longer uncomfortable silences. And eventually, as the behaviors escalated, separation, and divorce. It’s easy to blame: “He drank too much.” “She was hell to live with.” But really, the major factor was external, and neither of them was able to recognize it as the cause, nor deal with the to-them hidden changes.

A normal family thrown into disarray, their behavior escalated by forces beyond their control because it was beyond their understanding. How often have you heard a story like that? In families the divorce or separation rate is over 50%, yet how often do we point **to external circumstances that destabilize otherwise normal relationships**? Looking back, I can chart the various pressures that were placed separately on my parents that – unknown to them – pointed them toward the final implosion, but also – they could have understood – if could have acted as predictors of that implosion, allowing them to avoid it. **The outcome could have been different.**

Which brings me to today’s gospel. Some scholars are now beginning to wonder if Jesus was actually a Pharisee; others think that if he wasn’t actually a Pharisee he was very close to some Pharisees - they invited him to eat with them, shared humor and stories, talked religion together into the night. And the Kingdom Movement of which Jesus was a part was likely very similar to the other Jewish reform movements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century - like the Essenes, or even the Pharisees themselves.

In today’s gospel there are signs of a change in relationship for the worse. There’s disagreement, a normal “challenge and riposte” debate that seems to go bad, and then the beginning of scheming designed – I suppose – to “take that man Jesus down a peg or two.” Here is the Jewish religious family being thrown into disarray, and it’s so because of **external circumstances that destabilize otherwise normal relationships.**

Something has changed between Jesus and his debating partners. The breakdown in fraternal relationships leading to the confrontation we see in today’s reading only happens when Jesus comes to Jerusalem. It happens for at least three reasons:

1. It happens because the debates in Jerusalem pit the institutional hierarchical authority of

late 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Judaism against the more fluid, horizontal authority of a Jewish reform movement represented by Jesus - *everyone here is Jewish, everyone is family*.

2. It happens because of the increasing, massive pressure of 90 years of Imperial domination, **especially financial pressure** (again, Jesus spoke more about money....).
3. It happens because the debates take place during a festival celebrating the people's freedom from the oppression of an Empire, Egypt, at the Passover in the presence of the overlords of another empire – Rome.

It's possible to chart the effect of the various forces on both Jesus and those who opposed him and predict the inevitable outcome. And had any of the various Jewish protagonists – Jesus, the Pharisees, the Temple Authorities – been aware of those stressors and understood them as predictors, **the outcome could have been different**.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the encounter between the institutional hierarchical authority of Churches like the Episcopal Church and the more fluid, horizontal authority of an emerging Christian movement is placing stressors on our Denomination. Other stressors include that familiar, age-old friend: money.

And just as it happens at the macro level, it also happens at the micro-level: here, in our community.

I experience that struggle between institutional hierarchy and a more fluid and horizontal vision of community (the one in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12) internally – I represent the former, but am also committed to the latter. That can produce some quirky behavior! Sometimes you hear me saying “you do this because you're better at it than me, and baptism gives you authority to act.” But then other times you hear me saying “by the authority vested in me by the Institution.....”! And if both happen in the same decision-making stream I can now see that it could be crazy-making – it surely must seem schitzophrenic!

Figuring out how we all should oversee and collaborate for the health of our community's life is an ongoing project, and it shouldn't be limited only to the parish leaders. We all have a stake in this place – which is why, incidentally, we did the CAT, and the CAT-tracks, and will continue with that mode. So I need your help to remind me when I do stuff that's crazy-making! You know I'll likely remind you! How we do that is something I'll talk about next week.

Here's the thing, though. When things in general are going well, the sort of normal struggles that any community faces are just that: normal. We can deal with them. But as was the case with my parents, or with Jesus and his fellow Jews, when you add stressors – especially around money – all hell can break loose. People act out of stress, anxiety, fear, in disproportionate ways to when those aren't present. I have done that in the months since Judy Yeakel died – \$54,000 is a lot of parish income to lose in one year, and one of my stressors is that I feel a strong sense of responsibility to address that hole. If you have been hurt by my stress, and the actions that flowed from it, please accept my apologies. To those of you who have been acting the way I just described I have acted: I get it – if we are Christians then we acknowledge two things in this context: that we're gonna fall on our faces sometimes, and that the hand of reconciliation is

always reaching out to help us stand back up and embrace each other.

Unlike my parents, or even Jesus and his fellow Jews, we know what's causing most of our stress, and raising our anxiety, and creating our fear and provoking our anger in this place. Our current financial challenge is the major stressor for those of us trying to figure out what to do. This is a test of our Christian identity as a community who are fond of saying that we get on with each other, that we enjoy each other, that we enjoy this place, that it's a welcoming, safe home for us to get away from the world's stresses. It's how we act at times like this that tell us who we really are. Our core values of faith that invite a particular way of acting in this context.

We can overcome. But we can only overcome it if we're all part of the solution, not contributors to the problem, if we do it together, if we are willing to say that there's no 'me,' and no 'you,' only us – and, further, there's only us as those incorporated through baptism into the body of Christ crucified, only us who choose to live in a certain way, ethically, with integrity and with love. Amen.