

Ron Gilmer
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year A
28 September 2008

ON DEATH, TAXES AND PROSTITUTION

MATTHEW 21:23-32

Jack Haberer says that it is inevitable. In the next decade, the “fidelity and chastity” clause will disappear from *The Book of Order*, and the PC(USA) will begin ordaining gays and lesbians to serve as deacons, elders and Ministers of Word and Sacrament with the church’s blessing; and you know what? I trust his judgment. Haberer serves as editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, which, year after year, has proven to be the most respectable independent publication in the PC(USA). Haberer, who once moderated the Presbyterian Coalition (which in many ways, functions as the antithesis of the Covenant Network or More Light Presbyterians), has become increasingly moderate through the years, and his book *God Views* has been helping Presbyterians---all Presbyterians, liberal, moderate and conservative--better understand one another since its publication in 2001. Not only is he familiar with the church’s history, he knows Presbyterians today. His thoughts about where we will be ten years from now are encouraging. Hallelujah! The question for him is not if gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgendered Presbyterians will be ordained openly, but when.

The Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley has been active lately. I have been to Birmingham each of the past two weeks and will be there again on Thursday. The first in this series of meetings was with Haberer. The second was at a retreat for pastors of small churches, during which we discussed how to discuss the General Assembly’s recommendations vis-à-vis ordination. A discussion about a discussion: Is there anything more Presbyterian?

What do *you* think? Are changes to *The Book of Order* inevitable? Sure, they are. Presbyterians are reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God. If we ever stop changing, if we

ever stop being transformed, the PC(USA) will become extinct. The question is, “Will the church ever be changed with respect to ordination by virtue of our common baptism?” Is anything inevitable? If so, please pull out our crystal balls and predict the future.

One of the objections to congregations and presbyteries calling for change on this particular subject is, “The church has already spoken. How many times do we have to say, ‘No’?” My thought is, “until the church starts asking about one’s DNA before baptizing a baby, until you understand how Pharisical saying ‘no’ is.” The evidence suggests that being gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgendered is inevitable, and for the church to relegate any member to secondary status because of the way that God created him or her is to renege on a congregation’s baptismal vows. I pray that the PC(USA) will stop it, that the church will stop practicing discrimination and give thanks to God for all loving relationships. Maybe it will. Maybe it will not.

Nothing is certain in life except death and taxes (and some say that taxes are optional). In *The Political History of the Devil* published in 1726, Daniel Defoe writes, “Things as certain as death and taxes, can be more firmly believed.” Oh, so now there are degrees of inevitability (depending not on the firmness of one’s mattress but on the firmness of one’s belief)? Does not this suggestion undercut the very notion of inevitability? Something is inevitable or it is not. Ask Benjamin Franklin. He coins the phrase in a letter to Jean-Baptist Leroy in 1789, saying, “In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” Then in *Gone with the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell pushes this assumption further. In preparing for them, she concedes, “Death, taxes and childbirth! There’s never a convenient time for any of them.”

Of these, death is the only circumstance that applies to everybody (and our neighbors who except Jesus to return sooner rather than later would quarrel with this). It is difficult to speak of the inevitability of birth, because by the time that we are able to talk about it, we have to speak of it in the past tense. Taxes are, in fact, optional, at least until one chooses to be gainfully employed; and children,

inasmuch as our culture (and especially our subculture) expects us to have them, are optional (at least until we have them, and even then children, sadly enough, are neglected, abandoned and/or abused). Responsibility does not translate into inevitability, even though it should. If justice is inevitable in one situation, why is it not inevitable in another? Or maybe it is; it is just that human beings become more impatient with a particular injustice before acting out against another. Maybe the church responds to God's call to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly at a pace understood only by God. Scripture says it again and again. Inevitably, justice will roll down like water, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. The question is, "How soon?" In Jesus Christ, the stream has started flowing. Sometimes it feels like a gusher; sometimes it seems to drip slowly, but thanks be to God that it is dripping.

Now on to prostitution: This is a subject that is near and dear Jesus' heart, especially in the Gospel of Matthew. Maybe this is because Matthew is the tax collector among the Gospel writers, and tax collectors often are stuffed into the same box as prostitutes in the first and second century. Taxes may be inevitable, and yet nobody pays them enthusiastically, and prostitution...it seems to me that everybody sells out to somebody on some level. For further evidence, please visit Wall Street or Washington as soon as enough fuel is available for you to do so.

Is prostitution inevitable in the church and the world? Forgive me. I know that the language of prostitution is enough to make some Presbyterians squirm (some more than others), but prostitution is biblical. It is part of God's story. It is part of yours; it is part of mine. In Matthew's Gospel, prostitutes and tax collectors come off looking better than chief priests and elders, because it seems as if prostitutes and tax collectors are capable of reform, of being reformed, when chief priests and elders are not.

Chief priests and elders interrupt. They disrupt God's rhythm in the church and the world. In the beginning of this story, Jesus is teaching in the temple, and what do they do? They interrupt: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" First observation: one

sentence, two references to authority. Second observation: Jesus' authority comes not from a "what" but a "who:" the God who has become incarnate in him. Third observation: Jesus cites baptism as his authority; not Scripture or *The Book of Order*, but baptism.

Jesus engages the chief priests and elders in a game of chess by asking, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Caught off guard, the chief priests and elders caucus: "If we say, 'from heaven,' our record will be impossible to defend...If we say, 'of human origin,' that will be political suicide given John's approval rating." So they concede, "We do not know."

You do not know? Jesus says, "Listen to this story," and they do, even though they probably feel as if their brains are melting. A son says he's not going to vineyard changes his mind. So does the son who promises his father that he will be there. Jesus poses the question: Which son did the will of his father? The chief priests and elders relax. At last Jesus asks them a question that they can answer in public, during a debate: "The first."

"The first," Jesus agrees. Then he pulls out what has to feel like a dagger and plunges it into the hearts of would-be oppressors: "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." Why? Because of their faith, because of their willingness to change the world and themselves, because of their willingness to be changed, to be reformed, by the Word of God, by virtue of their baptism.

The past is the past. Nothing---not death, not taxes, not prostitution---can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ past, present or future. Nothing can change the fact of baptism or the rights and responsibilities that go with being baptized. Is it possible to stray from the path, to twist our lives into something that God never intended them to be? Sure. You and I do it all the time; and I pray that we recognize this. I pray that we will always be willing to change and be changed---not for change's sake---but for God's glory revealed to us first in the waters of baptism and ultimately in streams of justice, streams of justice that are as inevitable as God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ, as inevitable as

God's love for you and God's love for me. Now to the Ruler of all worlds, undying, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.