

Revised Common Lectionary Notes for the Children's Sabbath

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First Thessalonians 1:1-10 While it is sometimes a stretch for a preacher to move from a biblical text to the current need to be addressed, such is not the case today. Directly and indirectly, all these texts (Exod. 33:12-23; 1 Thess. 1:1- 10; Matt. 22:15-22) speak to the concerns of the Children's Sabbath. In fact, the Epistle lesson, 1 Thess. 1:1-10, contributes the theme. It seems appropriate, therefore, to begin our reflections on the texts with 1 Thessalonians, moving then to Exodus and to Matthew, rather than in the usual order of Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel.

We look at 1 Thess. 1:1-10 first through a wide-angle lens. The Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15) ended with the conclusion that Jews and Gentiles alike had equal access to the grace of God. Paul, a missionary to Gentiles, must have been pleased, but he knew that there is often a great distance between official church pronouncements and the lives of parishioners. Paul's subsequent confrontation with Simon Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-21) is a case in point. Even so, with zeal to continue his work, Paul chose Silvanus (Silas, Acts 15:22) and later Timothy (Acts 16:1-5) to join him in establishing churches in Europe, beginning in Macedonia and Achaia (comprising modern Greece). Moving from north to south they worked primarily in the larger cities: Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth (Acts 15:40-18:21). Paul was only briefly in Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia, a large multi-cultural city and the seat of Roman government for the area. Paul was concerned about his brief stay lest they think he was one of those popular preachers going from town to town lining his pockets. Unable to return himself (1 Thess. 2:18; he was now in Athens), Paul sent Timothy (1 Thess. 3:1-6) who returned with good news of the health of the church. Paul and companions moved farther south to Corinth where he wrote this letter to the Thessalonians, probably 49-50 CE. This letter is the first of Paul's epistles and, therefore, the earliest Christian document in existence.

Now we zoom in for a closer look at the text. In 1:1-10 we meet what became Paul's trademark epistolary beginning: the signature, address, and salutation "Grace and peace," a joining of the common Greek and Hebrew greetings; in other words, total inclusivity. Then follows the Thanksgiving (1:2-10), a common feature of correspondence of the day, but in Paul's hands, a summary of praise to God, recital of his relation to the readers, their situation, and the work before them. The letter was to be read in the worship service of the church. However, the most striking feature of the Thanksgiving (1:2-10) is that Paul has already settled on a way of framing the Christian life, which he was to repeat in this and later correspondence: the triad of faith, love, and hope (1 Thess. 5:8; Rom. 5:1-5; 1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5-6). But in this his first letter he is clear that faith, love, and hope are not to be understood by his readers as personal qualities, virtues to be cultivated in private exercises of polishing one's soul, of thinking good thoughts, of feeling good within one's self. Faith, love, and hope are not qualities to be possessed but tasks to be done. Putting too much stress on the inner life can be paralyzing, resulting in a subjective captivity of the Gospel.

It is not so with Paul; for him these words have perspiration on them, working not watching, emptying their pockets for other people's children. These words are not standing still. Listen to Paul: "Your work of faith, your labor of love, your steadfastness of hope" (v.3). When Paul repeats the triad later he uses verbs, not nouns: to turn, to serve, to wait (v.9). The church, which uses this triad to understand itself will not, cannot, be content to sing "Jesus loves the little children of the world"; it will not, cannot, simply pray for the children; it will not, and

cannot, only shed a tear in sorrow for the children. That church will act out of faith, serve in love, and anticipate a better future with steadfastness.

Exodus 33:12-23 This extraordinary text consists of a conversation between God and Moses, a conversation which takes place at a very critical time in the life of Israel. God heard the cries of Israel in bondage and delivered the people from the Pharaoh of Egypt. On their way toward the land of promise, they arrive at Mount Sinai where, through their leader Moses, they receive the commandments by which they are to live as the people of God (Exod. 20-23). A covenant is sealed between God and Israel (Exod. 24) and all seems well. Instructions are given for building the tabernacle, a sacred place of meeting between God and the People (Exod. 25-32).

Then everything breaks loose. Moses is on the mountain forty days and nights receiving revelations, but that is a time too long, say the people. They feel abandoned by God and Moses and revert to idolatry. Aaron, the priest and brother of Moses, leads Israel in this violation of the law and the covenant (Exod. 32). Aaron is the epitome of those clergy in every age who cater to the worst in people for the ego satisfaction and monetary gains that follow. Moses is angry, coming down the mountain, shattering the two tablets containing the law. God is angry, ready to destroy the people and begin anew with Moses to create a new people (Exod. 32).

Now comes the conversation between God and Moses (Exod. 33:12-23). The conversation is possible because they are not strangers: God and Moses have been talking since the experience of the burning bush. The conversation is vigorous because they have a history of trying to persuade each other. They, in fact, argued. This vigorous feature of Jewish prayer life is often missing from Christian piety which embraces silent acquiescence as the better expression of faith. We might do well to recapture the prayer life of Moses, and of Jacob who wrestled all night, or of Paul who asked the church in Rome to "Agonize with me in prayer" (Rom. 15:30), or of Jesus who pictured prayer as a widow with bloody knuckles knocking on the locked door of a heartless judge (Luke 18:1-18). Harsh as it may sound, maybe the prayer life of silent acquiescence is born not so much of reverence but of a hesitation to include in our time of study and meditation the really tough issues that hurt and destroy life. Small matters can be handled, thank you, Jesus, but 14.5 million children in gnawing poverty, that is too big as a prayer alone; it is also an assignment. And since first grade we have resisted assignment. It is easier to argue over prayer in public school than it is to see that all children are able to go safely and happily to school.

Read again Exod. 33:12-23. Moses has two issues to be taken up with God: Will God continue to lead the people to the land of promise, and will God assure Moses that Moses is in God's favor? Both are critical matters. The first because God has become angry with unfaithful and idolatrous Israel and has threatened to end their relationship here and now. Moses knows that God has both wrath and mercy, that God's moral imperatives are to be obeyed or dire consequences will follow, but also that God shows mercy and forgives, entering into new covenants with the very people who broke the old. Moses presses God: Will you in your wrath remember mercy? "Mercy it will be," says God, and "I will be with my people as the journey continues." In other words, the leader of the people is their intercessor, their mediator. No, he is more than that: he is their advocate. The leader of a faith community has no more important role than this. On critical issues that face the faith community, or rather the whole nation, the leader cannot be content to moderate a mild afternoon debate; the leader must speak a Yes or a No; must advocate, not moderate. Especially when there are millions who have no voice unless it is the voice of an advocate. The second issue in the conversation between Moses and God is

also important: Will God give Moses personal assurance of favor? This is not a selfish request. Moses knows the continued effectiveness of his work is directly dependent on his own relation to God. The leader is not a retailer of religion to others. Many a pastor has suffered the slow death of the soul while busy as a bee taking care of the souls of others. As a civil rights worker sighed over the failure of a major project: "We had too many people sign up to do the Master's work who didn't know the Master."

Matthew 22:15-22 We come now to the Gospel reading, a reading which speaks to the theme of Children's Sabbath with yet another voice, not that of Paul or of Moses but of Jesus himself.

Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem in the manner commemorated by the church on Palm or Passion Sunday. The days that follow are filled with a number of controversies between Jesus and lay and clergy leaders of the religious establishment. These verbal clashes are not true debates that function to inform an audience or to pursue the truth. Rather, these skirmishes are designed to ensnare Jesus in a wrong or at least an unpopular answer. The goal is to paint Jesus into a corner and then to say triumphantly, "Gotcha!" Jesus, Matthew says, was fully aware of the malicious intent of his interrogators (v.18). Their transparent flattery when approaching Jesus hardly concealed their motive (vv. 16-17).

The question brought to Jesus was one which, when free of traps and snares, deserved serious consideration. Very likely it was addressed frequently by rabbis and scribes knowledgeable in the law of Moses. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" A straightforward answer would be, "There is nothing in the law of Moses that forbids the payment of tribute to the governing authorities." However, Jesus is not engaged in a straightforward discussion but one filled with strong emotion and treacherous intent. Consider the tax itself. The "census" or "head" tax was instituted in 6 CE when Judea became a Roman province. The tax was offensive; that it could be paid only with a Roman coin was doubly offensive. Adding insult to injury was the inscription on the coin: "Tiberius Caesar, August son of the Divine Augustus, High Priest." Mention the tax and emotions boiled. More than anything else, this tax created the nationalistic Zealot movement, the activities of which led to the 66-70 CE war and the destruction of Jerusalem. The moment Jesus met his questioners could have been incendiary.

Who were these interrogators? Matthew says they were disciples of the Pharisees along with Herodians. Unfortunately, "Pharisee" is among many Christians a pejorative term when, in fact, they were in many ways kin to Jesus. They focused on Scripture and considered it primary that God's people know and do God's will. As all Christians are not alike, neither were all Pharisees, and some of them intensely disagreed with Jesus' interpretation of certain Scriptures and with the company Jesus kept. To these, Jesus destabilized the religious community. Surprisingly, they join forces with Herodians, supporters of the Herod dynasty, more political than religious, and unlike the Pharisees, probably supported the tax.

What a strange sight! Here stands Jesus in the temple area, teacher, healer, lover of the least and the lost, embracer of the poor and the marginalized, friend of sinners, and toward him comes an angry coalition. Pharisees and Herodians, in other words, church and state temporarily dropping their differences to join forces in order to get rid of Jesus. They think they have him in the crossfire; however he answers the question will be wrong. He will either be not religious or not patriotic. Their question is not, "Jesus, what can we do to help the painfully needy in our community?" Their question is rather, "Jesus, what do you think about the tax?" Pardon me, but is not the question not "what do you think about ---?" but rather "what are you

doing about ---?" Somehow all this sounds too familiar. Jesus is patient with his opponents, although he must have enjoyed the moment when he asked for a coin and they produced the very coin that was the issue, and there in the sacred temple. Jesus' answer, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" was not a clever move, not an attempt to be evasive, not a definition of how one handles church and state. What he says is that in every situation, each person must make the decision about priorities. The decision is mine; not even Jesus can decide for me.