

You have heard it was said . . . -But I say to you . . . Matthew 5:21-22

Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks put together an act some 25 years ago in which Carl Reiner interviews a 2000 year old man – played by Brooks. It was a great idea because Reiner could pick any event or person in history and allow Brooks to let his brilliant insanity run wild. In one of the routines Reiner asks the 2000 year old man if he ever met Jesus. Brooks says indeed he did – thought Jesus was a nice man – said he stopped in the store sometimes – *never bought anything*.

I think in that punch line Brooks tapped into something very true about Jesus, because an attentive reading of the Gospels reveals that Jesus often *didn't buy* into whatever the prevailing standards of the times demanded. He came across as contrary, even defiant. Take his behavior with a leper. Society required lepers to maintain social distancing. A leper appeals to Jesus to be healed and Jesus, moved with pity, *touches* him and says: *Be made clean*. Then later, stretcher-bearers place a paralytic before him. It was the Sabbath – no labor to be undertaken – doctors' offices closed – see you tomorrow. Jesus doesn't wait. He tells the paralytic to get up and go home.

The standard bearers of society are also unnerved by his open engagement with collaborationists, his partying with unsavory characters. Jesus responds: *Those who are "healthy" don't need treatment – the sick do. Indeed they are worthier than propriety would imagine - interesting people*. Again on a Sabbath, when labor, like harvesting grain, was disallowed in keeping with "God's Law", followers of Jesus harvest kernels of wheat to quell their hunger. *Unlawful*, say the legal experts. *No way*, says Jesus. *A man's hunger has priority over any law of abstinence*. Then we meet a man with a withered hand at synagogue. Again the Sabbath; no interventions allowed even for a good reason. Jesus challenges the lawyers: *Is doing good on the Sabbath an evil thing?* And he defiantly turned to the impaired fellow and said: *Stretch out your hand*. And his hand was restored! Which proved too much for the standard bearers of those days. *We have to get rid of this fellow; he is setting a bad example. He is not buying into our system. He is promoting common sense – (otherwise known as grace). We could go on.*

In today's Gospel Jesus is asked whether a subject population should pay taxes to the Roman Empire. The scene reminds me of a moment in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* in which the hero, Leopold Bloom, is fantasized as the new Messiah, everyone cheering his elevation. Bloom condescends: *My beloved subjects, a new era is about to dawn. I, Bloom, tell you verily it is even now at hand*. One fellow, hopeful of the change, asks: *What am I to do about my rates and taxes*. To which the new Messiah says, *Pay them my friend*. So much for a "new era"!

In today's reading the establishment wants to see if Jesus is on their side or the Roman Empire's. Jesus says in effect he is on neither side *and* on both sides. In other words there is a third choice – God's side as father and mother of us all, all of us being kin to *begin with*. As cosmic family, what has money to do with it? I never had to purchase my relationship with my aunt Lena or my grandmother or sister or cousin. It was all gratis, which means: without charge – as in "grace". It was in no way "taxing".

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