Sermon for Sunday, October 22, 2017

Sermon Texts: Exodus 33: 12-23

# Matthew 22: 15-22

I Thessalonians 1: 1-10

# Sermon Title: "On the Tightrope"

Sermon Topic: The place of work in our lives

Sermon Purpose: To teach the need for the balance of work and family life

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*Sermon Prayer: Loving God, we pray that you guide our hearts and minds as Your Word and Your Love are revealed to us. May the meditation of my heart and the words of my lips bring glory to your name. Amen.*

Barbara Agoglia was a director in the Small Business Unit at American Express. Working more than 50 hours a week and driving a 90-minute commute each day, she was on the brink of burnout. Then came the breaking point: her son started school, and she didn't have the time to wait with him at his bus stop. Feeling like a hamster on a wheel, she took what seemed her only option: she quit her job.[[1]](#endnote-1)

She’s not alone. Harvard University president Neil Rudenstein found it necessary to leave his position for a two months “leave of absence” in order to have a time of "rest and recovery." According to a professor of organizational behavior at the University of Texas in Arlington, he has a lot of company. He discovered "The average tenure of [university] presidents … in the past 10 years has dropped from approximately seven to three-and-a-half years,"[[2]](#endnote-2) because it's just too hard to keep the pace for longer than that.

Many workers today agree that it feels like **simply working hard** is **not enough** anymore. You may hear – or experience for yourself - that "In order to get ahead, a 70-hour workweek is the new standard."*[[3]](#endnote-3)* Even if you’re **not** working 70 hours a week, you may feel that the **pace** or the **expectations** of your job leave too little of your energy and focus for your family, never mind for your other pursuits that make up a good life. Expectations ratchet up, while job security diminishes. And meanwhile our kids are busier than ever. Then, too, church and community organizations **also** demand **their** piece of your time. Too many of us are left on what feels like a no-win treadmill. For many of us, work is the new Caesar, the oppressive but **unchallengeable** authority that makes life unmanageable.

So we can appreciate the bind that Jesus is in when he is asked whether it is right to pay taxes to Caesar. If he says “yes,” he's implicitly sanctioning all the abuses of this occupation government, as well as the Emperor's pretensions to divinity. Yet if he says “no,” he will bring the wrath of the Roman legions down upon his head. No matter how Jesus answers, he's in trouble.

That's not unlike many workers today who know that their jobs are costing them their own and their family's well-being, yet who can afford to quit or to become too expendable to their employer? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar? Are the only options the ones Barbara Agoglia felt she had – to either put up and shut up, or to quit? What did Jesus have to say about it?

His response was so effective at short-circuiting his opposition that it's easy to lose sight of the fact that **he didn't actually come down one way or the other**. He didn’t give us an **answer**. He gave us a **path** when he said, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what belongs to God." He didn't specify what exactly that meant: what was **Caesar's** - other than the coin, and what he thought was **God's**. In effect, he handed the problem back to his questioners, inviting each one to wrestle with his own circumstances and his own conscience, within the parameters of recognizing the legitimate authorities. Jesus says it's **not** an “either/or” question. Rather, it’s a constant struggle of **discernment**.

It's so easy for us to fall into opposing camps, to waver about the evidence for one side or the other, or to acquiesce to circumstances and **claim** we have **no choice**. We are forever tempted to avoid responsibility for our decisions ("Teacher, tell us what *you* think," or "they've got me over a barrel, I *have* to do it this way") or to settle for a simple all-or-nothing answer, to banter around slogans and pretend that it settles the matter. We hear that "Children who grow up in daycare do poorly academically and behaviorally," or, "In a fiercely competitive global economy, employers can't afford to do otherwise, or the jobs will go offshore." These assertions, and others like them, have a claim on us, although not an **exclusive** claim. There are no simple answers; there are only relevant questions.

In the old movie *Twelve Angry Men,* Henry Fonda plays one member of the jury that has heard the case of an 18-year-old charged with murder. The case appears to be open-and-shut: The boy is from a bad neighborhood, there is circumstantial evidence, two witnesses claimed to have seen or heard what happened; it is "obvious" that he did it. Juror #8, Fonda's character, isn't quite sure. It's a sweltering Chicago summer day as the jury retires to deliberate, and everyone just wants to go home, but Juror #8 refuses to make the conviction unanimous. In order to either hang or to acquit the boy, the jury must be in unanimous agreement; but Juror #8 refuses to settle for a quick vote and walk away. "A boy's life is worth an hour of our time," he insists. "I think we owe him a few words." And he begins raising questions.

One by one, the things that **seem** self-evident become less so; the roles that prejudice, assumptions, and slipshod procedure have played become visible. One by one the jurors become less certain that the boy is guilty, and as Fonda's questions probe their own issues, they become, variously, sympathetic, angry, and confused. In the end, from 11-and-a-half men convinced of the boys guilt, they return a unanimous 12-man verdict of "not guilty," because one man's persistent questions made them all recognize that there was - in fact - reason to be uncertain about this "open-and-shut" case.

Jesus is **our** Juror #8: Whatever our initial thoughts and gut responses to the question of work-life balance might be, he stands calmly to one side and asks, "Really, now?" He probes our loyalties and our assumptions, he asks us for the deeper truth of our lives, and he invites us to see that it isn't quite as simple as all that. To the question with no good **answer**, he brings all the good **questions**.

Isn’t this, after all, what faith is about: not so much having the right answers, but daring to live with the right questions? We often live with the *wrong* questions – the "what will go well with the neighbors" or the "what will make my life easiest" kinds of questions, instead of the "what is *really* at stake here" and the "how can I best honor *all* the legitimate claims" kinds of questions.

So often we find ourselves walking a tight rope – between the needs of job and family, for instance, while trying to keep our **own** needs on the table, too -and we can learn from watching how Jesus walked the tightrope he was on. It must've been very tempting for him to look at his feet – to see if he was still holding onto public popularity while he was staying out of trouble with the authorities. "Watch your step," we often say; and he must've been tempted. But even if you've never come closer to the tightrope walking then teetering along a fence rail as a kid, you know that "watching your step" is not the way to go. Because the minute you look at your feet you're sunk. You have to look, not at your feet, but at where you're going. Take the long view. Keep your eyes not on all the ways you could **fall off** but on what it means to **stay on**. Where is **your** center of gravity? You need to have that like a **rock** holding you steady, like the weighted bottom of a baby’s tumbler so you always bop back up. And you need to have really strong core muscles, because no matter how solid your center of gravity, you don't get to spend very much time being centered; you’re forever having to lean this way or that way to bring yourself back into balance while the winds of circumstance and the unsteadiness of progress are tossing you about. Life is a journey, much of it on a tight rope, and balance is a **dynamic**, not a static state.

Ironically, it is Jesus' **enemies**, as much as Jesus **himself**, who give us the clues we need to keep finding that balance. Jesus gives us the overall parameters: It’s not an either/or question, but a matter of two legitimate claims. But it's his **enemies** who tell us how he held them together. Just because their words were insincere doesn't mean they weren't true. When they've buttered Jesus up, hoping to grease the slope for his fall, they effectively named what **kept** him from falling, the line he sighted along to keep his balance. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to know one, for you do not regard people with partiality."

You are sincere. You teach – or you seek – the way of God in accordance with truth, looking past the surface. You do not simply take sides. You live, in other words, with the right questions, not with predetermined answers. You are willing to probe to the heart of things, not settle for surface appearance. You look the whole length of the tight rope, and keep solidly centered on the line, not on the drop on either side.

May *our* enemies – and our employers and our families – be able to say as much about us.

Let us pray:

*Heavenly Father, you have called us to always be mindful of the gifts you have provided and to live worthy of your love. Help us to know Your Word and to share Your Love with those we touch. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

1. “Survey: U. S. Workplace Not Family-Oriented," *Forbes,* February 1, 2007. Cited in *Wikipedia* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Work-life\_balance, [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Wikipedia* (http://en. wikipedia.org/wiki/Work-life balance). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)