

Return to Love

Matthew | Mateo 22: 15-22

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At the beginning of Zora Neale Hurston's Moses, Man of the Mountain, we encounter two enslaved Hebrews discussing the abhorrent conditions of their captivity in Egypt. The scene opens with an Egyptian foreman, who literally looks over the bent and bleeding backs of the Hebrew people to admire the setting sun.

"Ah, Horus, golden god!" he proclaims in reverential awe. "Lord of both horizons. The weaver of the beginning of things!"

The Hebrew Amram, struggling with the help of another man to move a heavy stone . . . heard this and looked up.

"Horus may be all those good things to the Egyptians, brother, but that sun-god is just something to fry our backs."

The other worker whispered back, "If Horus is the weaver of the beginning of things, he's done put some mighty strange threads in his loom..."

"Those temples were built by Egyptians and those gods were made by Egyptians," Amram reflects later. "**Gods always love the people who make 'em.** We can't put no faith in them . . . Anybody depending on somebody else's gods is depending on a fox not to eat chickens."

"I don't see no way out [of slavery] but death," he continues, "and . . . you are up against a hard game when you got to die to beat it."

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The story of Moses, the great liberator, has inspired communities suffering under occupation, oppression, and enslavement for millennia. And this was no exception for Zora Neale Hurston, the black author and anthropologist, who drew from a deep tradition of black meaning-making from the Book of Exodus. Literary scholar Deborah McDowell puts it this way: "If a people's myths are the fullest expression of its spirit and culture, nowhere is this more evident than in African Americans' appropriation of the story of Moses, the myth of the Israelites' exodus from Egyptian bondage."

Published in 1939, Hurston's novel draws on the ancient Hebrew Scriptures allegorically to address themes of patriarchy, black oppression in the United States, and Jewish persecution in Nazi Germany. And it is a sadly and chillingly relevant tale even for readers in 2020.

And while the novel advocates for liberation from oppression and the fulfillment of democracy, according to McDowell its satirical approach conceals any "essential, extractable political position." An elusiveness that was necessary in an era when black authors faced surveillance, censorship, and even persecution for any writing deemed unpatriotic.

So, as evidenced within this theologically rich conversation, Hurston draws subversively from the biblical canon, speaking a word of hope to her people in a language they will understand, but that the oppressive forces of her day would not.

Wise as a serpent, innocent as a dove. Just the way Matthew's Jesus commanded his disciples to move through the world.

Just like Matthew's Jesus models in today's gospel passage.

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To say that Jesus is caught between a rock and a hard place here is an understatement. He is set up either to betray the convictions of his faith and his people or to openly reject the authority of the region's Roman occupiers and face certain death.

Ever the trickster-prophet, Jesus swiftly escapes this trap with astonishing wisdom. Wise as a serpent, innocent as a dove, in a single move he politically embarrasses the religious leaders that challenged his teachings and theologically undermines the authority of the empire that threatened his life.

First, he turns the tables by asking the Pharisees to produce a graven image, a coin considered so blasphemous within the Jewish community that it couldn't even be used for currency within the temple. And they do it!—raising serious questions about their political loyalties and their regard for sacred law.

Second, he deftly redirects the conversation by making no direct claims on the taxes sought by the empire. Instead he draws upon the wisdom of his tradition to make even bolder, even deeper claims about our relationship to the divine.

The emperor may have all things that bear his image and proclaim his glory, Jesus says. And so, then, may God.

With denarius in hand, Jesus begs the question, what (or who) bears the image of God and what proclaims God's glory?

- **Genesis 1:** Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness . . . So God created humankind in God’s image, in the image of God the divine created them.”
- **Psalm 19:** “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork.”
- **Psalm 24:** “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for God has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.”

Jesus draws subversively from the biblical canon, speaking a word of hope to his people in a language they will understand, but that the oppressive forces of his day would not.

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You see, the Gospel of Matthew is written in the wake of a terrifying show of force by the Roman Empire, the destruction of the Second Temple. Like Hurston's drawing on the story of Exodus, Matthew nods to God's liberating power by fusing Jesus' legacy to that of Moses. He draws upon a deep knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures to critique other claims on the Jewish tradition (like those of the Pharisees in this passage) and to paint Jesus as the Messiah come to fulfill the Torah.

So when the Matthean Jesus says, "give to God the things that are God's," we know that Jesus is nodding to scriptures like the creation narrative in Genesis and the theological wisdom of the Psalms.

Matthew is deeply invested in building ekklesia—the church—a community centered around Jesus and set apart from the destructive power of the empire that occupies their land. So when the Matthean Jesus says, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's," he is saying there are even greater claims than that of an empire. There is a liberating power greater than that of an emperor's oppression. There is a resurrection power greater than the "hard game[s] you got to die to beat" as Amram calls them.

Just like us, the Matthean Jesus is instructing a community seeking to rebuild in the midst of a shattered world.

Just like us, the Matthean Jesus rests in a tension between the world as it is and the world as it was intended—and we hope, one day will be.

Just like us, the Matthean Jesus carries forth a tradition whose claims are deeper than powers of this world can even imagine.

And that's regardless of what shape those powers assume. Whether Pharaoh in ancient Egypt, Rome in first-century Palestine, Nazism in Germany, Jim Crow in Hurston's America. And yes, whoever claims victory in our election this year.

Now, hear me carefully. Early voting has started so GO VOTE. And encourage everyone you know to vote. But let's not forget in whom we find our hope. Regardless of who wins, friends, we still have a LOT of work to do.

As my colleague Donna Schaper says, we are not "the Democratic Party at prayer."

We are the Church, and we have our Messiah. We are the Church, and we have vision of liberation greater than any party's platform. We are the Church, and we see God's image and likeness inscribed on the face of every single person, especially the least and lost among us. We are the Church, and we see the glory of God reflected in and proclaimed from every corner of this tender creation.

So we give to the earthly powers the divine images they've molded in their likeness. We cast all idols back into the flames that wrought them. We conspire against the powers of death, and proclaim resurrection and life abundant.

And in so doing we return to God all that God has made. We return to Love all that is claimed by Love. **We return (all) to Love.**

And not the Love we so often speak of—the one that bears of the image of niceness. Fred Rogers says that love is an “active noun like struggle,” a striving to see others just as they are, and I don’t think he would oppose me adding—seeing them as divine image-bearers. James Baldwin says that love is a battle, a war, a growing up. And justice, Cornell West says, is what love looks like in public.

So like Jesus, like Matthew’s Gospel, like Zora Neale Hurston, we must draw subversively from the biblical canon, speaking a word of hope to Love’s people in a language they will understand, but that the oppressive forces of today would not.

We must fight like heaven to reclaim a world that has looked too much like hell for too many for far too long. In fact, we must love the hell right out of this world.

We must **be the Church**. A people gathered around God’s ancient and continuing story of liberation. A people who put our faith not the idols that reflect human powers, but in Love itself, who saw fit to imprint God’s likeness onto those who are counted least among us.

A people who return all things to Love.