

This is one of the stranger little stories in all Christian scripture. Jesus, Peter, John and his brother James have come down from the mountaintop experience of the transfiguration. On the way home, Jesus cured a boy that the disciples could not, showing Jesus that his followers are not perhaps as focused and as practiced as he hoped they might be by now.

So, he reminds them of his pending death and resurrection. And that distresses them greatly. We might reasonably expect Jesus to go a logical step further and remind them that they are bound to be fishers of people to give them some self-confidence for the ordeals still to come.

Instead, this time Matthew's Jesus sends Peter down to the Galilee to go fishing for an actual fish. He promises that the first fish caught will have a coin in its mouth that Peter can use to pay the temple tax.

That tax was expected of every adult Jewish man to help pay for the upkeep of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Now, Jews overwhelmingly saw the Temple as the house of God. And so, even outside Israel, Jews took the obligation seriously and paid the tax willingly, often with hopes that their good deed might bring them favor.

By the time Matthew's Gospel was being written, the Second Temple had been destroyed. But the Romans kept the tax in place and were diverting half of it to pay for a pagan temple in Rome.

Customarily, in the ancient world, the children of earthly kings didn't pay taxes to keep up the royal buildings. And Peter has just heard the voice of God calling Jesus the son, the beloved. And that means Jesus's followers are children of God and none of them are obligated to pay a tribute or toll to God's house, which is, of course, the royal abode of their heavenly parent.

Still, Jesus provided a way to pay the tax and what's more, to pay it without creating a scandal. And that begs the question: a scandal for whom?

Jesus' life, ministry and teachings were always an affront to the Roman Empire, so he clearly is not worried about upsetting them. Maybe he was just concerned about sounding the alarm too soon. In just a few chapters, Jesus himself will ride into the temple, overturn money-changers tables and challenge the temple priests and elders. Maybe he thought better of offending the Temple authorities prematurely.

I find it more likely that Matthew's Jesus was thinking about his fellow Jews, the fee-collectors and his Jewish followers. If they stopped paying the tax, the authorities would no longer consider them Jews. And that was an outcome that neither Jesus nor Matthew wanted.

So, in this story that appears only in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives his followers both a theological grounding for *not* paying the tax as well as a sensible and selfless rationale for *paying* it. In Matthew's day, the story allowed Jewish and pagan Christ-followers to hold their theological claims about Jesus and to keep their standing as Jews in the eyes of the governing authorities, all without further aggravating their situation with the Roman Empire.

Now, Matthew never tells us if Peter actually went down to the sea and caught a fish. We have no idea if a miraculous coin kept Jesus and Peter out of trouble. If so, it could only have been a temporary solution.

And so, maybe the point was never about Jesus making a coin appear in the mouth of a fish, as awesome as that would be. During Jesus' earthly life, all of the tax was still going to the upkeep of the Temple. Even so, maybe the point was never about Jesus being a good Jew or a good citizen, or even about his ability to find creative ways to keep the Temple in incense.

In the experience of the transfiguration, the disciples saw Jesus as he truly was; the Son of God, the Messiah of Israel. And yet, walking down the mountain, Peter, James and John still lacked the trust they needed to cure a boy that Jesus cured immediately.

Of course, it is not the depth or breadth of one's faith that matters most, but where that trust is placed. Bishop Tom Wright has pointed out that if you want to see the moon, the size of the window you are looking through is not important. What matters is that you are facing in the right direction.

A small crack in the wall will work if the moon is on that side of the house. A floor-to-ceiling picture window facing in the wrong direction will be no good at all.

Just so, *all* followers of the Risen Christ need to be watching in a fruitful direction, because the realm of heaven still coming is so far beyond our expectations. It may be easier for us to accept Jesus and an amazing fish story than it is to accept the full truth of the Risen Christ, a far more amazing story that is still emerging. It may be easier for us to wrap our minds around Jesus using a fish to pay an unjust tax than it is to make sense of Jesus using his own death to redeem an unjust world.

Maybe Jesus just needed to draw Peter's attention to where it rightfully belongs. Maybe, whether Peter went fishing or not is not important. Maybe the larger point was to remind all followers of Christ to bide our time, praying as we act. Trustfully watching in the direction of Christ as we walk through the lives God has given us.

Maybe this isn't really a story about an astonishing fish, but a story about ordinary lives lived on behalf of God's creation. A story about children of God who consider the consequences of their behaviors on their our brothers and sisters. Maybe this is a story about living responsibly in this temporary earthly realm while keeping our hope fixed on the heavenly realm that is *both* at hand and still to come.

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Works consulted:

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Wright, N. T. *Matthew for Everyone*. London: SPCK, 2004.