

20th Sunday after Pentecost Matt 22:15-22 Maricopa Lutheran Church October 18, 2020

As we gather today for worship, most if not all of us also gather as citizens. What do our faith and our citizenship have to do with each other? If we take a deep dive into today's Gospel, we may get some clues from how Jesus answered a trick question.

First, some context. One huge difference between then and now is that back then there was absolutely nothing like separation of church and state. Tiberius Caesar said that he was the son of a god and was the high priest of the empire. On the other hand, the Jewish people expected their God to rule the whole world as a king. God not Caesar. Religion and politics were one.

To understand today's Gospel, let's look at the key players. We'll start with the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Their top priority was to keep the Romans from destroying the temple. So, they compromised, accommodated, and played it safe.

Next are the Romans and tax collectors. The Romans took what they wanted, and the tax collectors got it for them, adding their high fees to the high taxes. This drove people into poverty.

The Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Zealots all wanted to get rid of the Romans. The Pharisees and Zealots thought that strictly obeying God's law would bring God's kingdom sooner. The Zealots were violent revolutionaries. The Herodians wanted a descendant of Herod to be king. The Pharisees and Zealots thought that paying Roman taxes was a treasonous sin.

Now for Jesus. He saw the idolatry of Caesar as the evil that it was. Caesar could be God's tool, as Jesus later told Pilate. But God's claim was first, last, always, and total.

However, Jesus did some things that were really confusing. On the one hand, he chose tax collectors to be his disciples, and he healed the children and servants of Roman soldiers. On the other hand, Jesus chose Peter, who probably was a Zealot, as well as Judas who almost certainly was. How do you think the former tax collectors and former Zealots got along with each other as they followed Jesus around the countryside?

The mission of Jesus was on a whole other level, one that went far beyond their divisions and even far beyond Caesar. His enemies were the dark forces of evil and death that ruled through Caesar and so many others.

God's kingdom would not be like the kingdom of David, but rather it would be a new heaven and a new earth where divine love shall overcome evil and death. One battlefield is the human heart, for a new heart changes everything else, including public life.

This mission is what Jesus and Peter were arguing about after Peter said that Jesus is the messiah. Jesus said his kind of messiah would be crucified and then rise from the dead on the third day. The kingdom of God would not come through violence but rather through suffering love.

Peter believed that this sentimental nonsense was absolutely ridiculous. He knew that the messiah's job was to kill Romans, not be killed by Romans. Peter knew that the resurrection would come at the end of time, not three days after a crucifixion. So, he tried to correct his messiah.

Then Jesus called Peter “Satan.” He said that his disciples would deny themselves and take up their crosses. As God would work through the suffering love of Jesus, so God also would work through the suffering love of his followers.

Now we turn to today’s Gospel. The Pharisees intentionally gave Jesus two bad choices: side with compromisers who paid Roman taxes, or side with violent revolutionaries who refused to pay. Either way, Jesus loses.

As rabbis often did, Jesus changed the question and gave a puzzling answer about giving Caesar the things of Caesar and God the things of God. Jesus and those who heard him knew that the things of God include absolutely everything with no exceptions, not even for Caesar.

Now, how can this strange passage guide us today? Certainly not by giving us easy answers.

First, would Jesus endorse a particular form of government, candidate, or party? Some people think so. I think that it’s far more complicated than that. Besides, everybody in government and politics is a sinner, just like all of us, and sin does what it does as we so plainly see, so very often.

Rather than give us a political program, Jesus gives us a spiritual perspective. He teaches us that God can use taxes and the other things of Caesar for his own divine purposes. As we discern how to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, we’re called to do this in a way that we honestly believe serves the purposes of God.

I think that faithful Christians can disagree about what particular ways are more effective in doing this or not. The point is that we put God first in all that we do, even if it involves sacrifices for us.

Just maybe we can do more of what Jesus did when he called both tax collectors and Zealots together as his disciples, so that those who vote very differently from each other also worship together as one people of faith. Maybe we can work harder for reconciliation and respect, especially with those we think are wrong. Maybe we can forgive more and show mercy more. Maybe we can do more of what makes for peace.

While our feet stand with the temporary things of Caesar, Jesus directs our eyes to the eternal things of God. He calls us to use the temporary to serve the eternal. For all worldly things finally shall be transformed, as our Lord brings a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness shall have a home.

Now for the rest of the story. Tiberius Caesar died. Jesus rose from the dead, and he shall come again to make all things new. The suffering love of Jesus continues to overcome the crosses that Caesar keeps making, and this victory shall be complete when Jesus comes again.

May his love work more and more through each of us in all aspects of our lives.

Amen

Pastor Carl A. Jensen livingsystemsconsult@gmail.com