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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24A)

October 22, 2017

Text: Matthew 22:15–22

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

When you read about politics in our country, do you normally think that God the Holy Trinity is the one working through those events and decisions? Do you ever think God is working through the kingdoms of this world to accomplish His will and purpose? Well, you should. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is king not only over the kingdom of grace but He also rules over the kingdom of the world. All authority in heaven and earth finds its source in God.

On November 19, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln spoke these famous words in the Gettysburg Address, “It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us . . . that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” Powerful, stirring words spoken during the dark days of our Civil War. We cherish our republican form of government where we are given the noble vocation of being active participants in government. But we must never forget, however, that God is the authority behind this government of the people; not the people themselves. God rules over the kingdoms of this earth whether they are democratic republics, a constitutional monarchy, an absolute monarchy, or any of the various oligarchies.

God rules over the political kingdoms of this world even as He rules over His spiritual kingdom manifested in the holy Christian Church. But He rules over them through different means to achieve different goals. The devil is always working to destroy both kingdoms on earth: political kingdoms and the Christian Church. The challenge for us as Christians to live faithfully in both kingdoms. The Lord Jesus gives us guidance that we might be His faithful people living on both kingdoms.

Let me set the context for today's reading from Matthew 22:15–22. The Pharisees are yet again attempting to discredit Jesus in the presence of the Jewish crowds. Matthew describes such efforts as plotting “to entangle Jesus in his talk.” (vs. 15). The Pharisees even join forces with the Herodians, a political group with whom they are normally at odds. The Herodians were Jewish supporters of Herodian family, the

puppet rulers given authority over Israel by the Roman Empire. You see an unlikely alliance between religion – the Pharisees and politics – the Herodians. Religion and politics have joined together to destroy Jesus.

Their assault begins with a little flattery. Vs. 16, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.” The Pharisees and Herodians have been calling Jesus anything but a true teacher of God. According to Matthew, Jesus is aware of their malice (vs. 18). You must be aware, dear people of God, Satan will try to use anyone and anything to accomplish his goal of hindering God’s rule and authority. That is why I admonish you to pray for discernment and the grace of the Holy Spirit as you live out your most holy faith each and every day.

Here’s their question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” (vs. 17) It’s a straightforward question. Taxes are about as concrete and every day as you can get. And it’s an almost perfect trap.

If Jesus says “no”, it’s not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar then the Herodians would report Jesus to the political leaders as inciting rebellion against the state; He’s telling people to stop paying taxes. If Jesus says “yes”, it’s lawful to pay taxes to Caesar then the Pharisees would inflame the crowd against Jesus. The Jewish crowd, by and large, hated the Romans and all their supporters. They would abandon Jesus.

Jesus, aware of their malice and their trap, responds with a verbal jibe of His own. “Why do you put me to the test, you hypocrites?” (vs. 18) He then requests a coin used to pay taxes. Using the Jews’ own money, Jesus springs His own attack against the Pharisees’ and Herodians’ malice, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?”

I’d love to have see their faces as they choked out their one-word answer, “Caesar’s” (vs. 21). And I’d really love to see their reaction when Jesus said, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (vs. 21). Did Jesus toss the coin back to them? I like to imagine Him doing so!!

There’s certainly a great deal of debate about what belongs to Caesar. Or to put it more concretely, what belongs to federal, state, and local governments. When does the tax rate become oppressive and unjust? Can government really make people serve on juries? Or draft men into the armed forces? Or regulate how many deer and antelope a landowner can shoot on his own land? Can it legitimately tell florist, bakers, photographers, dressmakers, hotel and conference centers, and so forth that they must

sell their merchandise and services to all customers to celebrate any and all events even if some of those events violate their religious sensibilities? Some of these questions are simpler than others. But Jesus' teaching remains clear. Whatever belongs to government should be given to government. Because civil government has God's authority behind it, it is to be obeyed even if we disagree with it (Luther, House Postils, v. 7, p. 147).

Yes, dear Christians, we believe that government exercises God-given authority and power. We believe that civil servants are God's ministers of His authority for the well-being of life in this world. In fact, we Christians believe God works through civil authority for the sake of His Church. St. Paul writes to the Ephesians, "And (God the Father) put all things under (Christ's) feet and gave him as head over all things to the church" (Eph. 1:22). Martin Luther preached a similar idea to his congregation in 1529, "In short, it is for the sake of the Christians that God spares the world. For his thoughts are these: My Christians give me what is mine and give Caesar what is Caesar's, and for this reason they must have peace, peace which is mine to provide and bestow. When God now grants Christians peace, this same peace also spreads over the ungrateful, who benefit from what Christians enjoy" (v. 7, p. 155).

It is lawful and good for Christians to hold political and civil authority, for Christians to serve in the military, to serve on local boards and committees, and to be involved actively in all forms of legitimate government and commerce. And yes, it is most proper for Christians to exercise the authority given to them as husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, and so forth. We pray for all who are in authority so that justice, virtue, and peace can prosper in our country and in all the countries of the world. We honor and hold in high esteem all who hold political and civil authority. Even when we disagree with them, we honor them for the office in which they hold. We believe, God works through them for good of all but especially His Church.

What's harder is the second half of our Lord's famous statement even though we often take it for granted. "Render to God the things that are God's." You see, God isn't so much interested in your money and property – those are things of this world under His authority exercised through civil governments – as He is in you! And not just part of you but all of you, body and soul.

The denarius bore the image of Caesar; it belonged to him. You bear the image of God; you belong to Him. In baptism, you were marked with the name of God. So give to God what belongs to Him starting with yourself: body and soul, heart and mind,

emotions and strength, will and desires, every breath and heartbeat. The 1st Commandment, “You shall have no other gods” requires that “we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” We belong to Him. Now give to Him what is rightfully His. You, and all of you.

Sound easy? There’s nothing harder. The cross of Jesus stands as the immovable beacon that says “You can’t give to God what belongs to Him...not without Me.” The eternal Son of God the Father took on our human flesh and blood in order to bring us back to God. Because of our sinful actions in thought, word, and deed, we became thieves: taking from God what belongs to Him. Jesus fixes that damnable problem by offering up Himself. The apostle Peter declares that we were ransomed from our sin not with the gold and silver of Caesar but with the precious blood of Jesus (I Peter 1:18–19). And St. Paul admonishes us Christians, in I Cor. 6:20, that we are temples of the Holy Spirit. As such, we are bought with a price – the death and resurrection of God’s Son – therefore we are to glorify God in our bodies as well as our souls.

God’s spiritual kingdom is a realm whose citizenry is made up of those whose hearts are united together in trust and faith in God. And what does God require of us in His kingdom of grace, the Church, especially since He claimed us as His own in baptism and we, in turn claim Him? We pledge our hearts to believe in God the Holy Trinity alone above all things for life and salvation in this world and the world to come; to bring forth good works of faith toward God and love for our neighbor; to listen to no other Word that God’s; to cling to no other Gospel than the one once delivered to the saints by His apostles and prophets; to have no other Savior from sin, Satan, death, and evil than the Lord Jesus Christ, the One sent by the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. To give what is God’s is none other than to have faith in Him and to have love for your neighbor (paraphrase of Luther, p. 153).

You dear saints, are citizen of two kingdoms. But you have one Lord and Master who rules over them both for your good. Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s. You do so in worship to God. And give to God what is God’s. He’s done for you what you couldn’t do for yourself: rendered you, body and soul, to His heavenly Father. That too is God-pleasing worship.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.