

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A

31st Sunday of Quarantine (32nd Overall)

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 45:1-7

Psalms 96:1-9[10-13]

I Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

10/18/2020

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

15Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said. 16So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. 17Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." 22When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

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

Amen.

Division

Good morning! I remember exactly where I was, that's how much the lesson stuck with me. I was a freshman at good ol' Martins Ferry High School and we were in the first class of the day waiting for things to get started. I'm not sure how the topic came about, but for some reason my friends and I were discussing the amount that was taken out of our taxes from our part time jobs. This was before the days of direct deposit, so I distinctly remember looking at that second half of my paycheck that gave me the breakdown for things like FICA, federal, state, and local tax. "I hate taxes," I echoed, agreeing with my friends. I didn't know much about the world, but experience from those around me and the culture made it clear, if you were a human being, you were supposed to hate taxes. But then our biology teacher spoke up. "I don't hate taxes, he said. Our heads swiveled around in confusion, because clearly our teacher had gone insane. But then he explained something to me that has never left me. He explained that while he didn't enjoy losing money, he was happy to support the many things that our taxes go on to fund. He talked about all the scientists who get funding from the government funds that have allowed us to make huge discoveries in biology and other scientific fields. He talked about the many medical advancements that wouldn't have been possible without the support from our taxes. He pointed out that every time we saw a freshly paved road it was our tax dollars at work.

I was genuinely speechless. I doubt my teacher knew what he had done, but my outlook had been changed forever. My income didn't just disappear for no reason, I now saw concretely what that extra little bit did. From that point on I have stopped complaining about the tax that is taken out of my paycheck. I wish it got spent differently, but I've never stopped

advocating for the support of so many services and organizations that I benefit from.

The same could not be said for taxation in the first century. At every level of the system, it was filled with corruption and abuse. Rome assigned an amount that each region of the empire was responsible for meeting, in whatever way possible. The local leaders, people like King Herod and Pontius Pilate would raise that number so they could receive a cut for their own pockets. This system continued all the way down to the actual tax collectors themselves, who relied on raising the tax that would be required to provide for their own paycheck. A “decent” tax collector would keep that number low, but there was no regulation and they could demand as much as they wanted. This is why tax collectors were especially hated in the first century.

Which brings us to our text today. Who would have thought that just a short little lesson could cause so much tension? In just 158 words we see a whole lot of trouble brewing. Our story picks up directly after the strange parable of the banquet we read last week, and we are immediately reminded that since Jesus and his group have come storming into Jerusalem protesting and causing chaos that those in leadership positions really want to get rid of this guy. We know this because two groups that wouldn't normally be caught dead together have decided to team up against Jesus. The Pharisees and the Herodians working together is like hearing that the USSR and the United States of America, at the height of the Cold War, have decided to work together to bring down some guy from Antarctica. It just wouldn't happen. But happen it does! The Pharisees were religious extremists. They obeyed the rule of the Hebrew Scriptures in such a strict way that any normal average Jew was amazed. The Pharisees are

what eventually become the Rabbi's that we all know today. A Pharisee was as removed from Roman rule as was possible. The only groups more extreme were the Zealots and the Essenes, who Rome killed and wiped out. The Herodians, on the other hand, had gone all in with Rome. They were some sort of sect in Israel, possibly similar to a political party that was in control of the day-to-day business of commerce and life for anyone in the area. They had no problem standing next to the empire, and in that shadow they gained wealth and power.

It's a sign of how dangerous Jesus has become that both of these groups feel threatened by Jesus, and so they work together to take him down. And yet, Jesus remains as slippery as an eel, has some tricks of his own. If he says to pay the tax, he sides with the very group that persecuted the people of Israel. If he said not to pay the tax, he was an enemy of the state. So what would it be? This whole exchange takes place in the Temple. So when Jesus asks for a denarius, he is specifically asking for the exact currency that was needed to pay that tax. All sorts of goods could be used as currency, but the denarius specifically represented the power of Rome and the pagan religion of emperor worship. And as Douglas R.A. Hare points out, *"Exodus 20:4 prohibits 'graven images' of any kind. Yet here, in the most holy space in the holy land, Jesus' adversaries promptly produce a coin that violates the dictates of their religion! The hypocrisy is obvious. They are happy to do business with Caesar's coins. Why then should they raise a religious question about giving Caesar his due?"*¹

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's," Jesus responds. And it's the second half of this statement that needs special attention. "And to God the things that

¹Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 254.

are God's" becomes the reminder that all things derive their power first from God. Dr. Hare writes that: *"Christians concerned about political issues and church-state relations eagerly approach this passage, hoping to find a principle to guide them through the maze of contemporary controversies. We must be careful, however, not to draw from the passage more than it contains."*² Jesus isn't making the point that we split our lives in service, half to God and half to the state. No, Jesus is pointing out that God controls all aspects of the world, every single bit. And it's here where our faith should be grounded, too. Amen.

² Ibid. p. 253.