

October 18, 2020 – Psalm 121 & Matthew 22:15-22

This past Wednesday, I was doing the chapel service with the preschool and kindergartners, as I always do. We were covering the 7th commandment – you will not steal. And for that I was going to teach them the story of Zacchaeus. About how he stole from people, but the forgiveness of Jesus caused him to repent of his sin and be generous to the poor. Thus, keeping the 7th commandment.

But in order to teach the story, I first had to teach them what a tax collector was. Which meant that I had to make sure they knew what taxes were. And so I asked them, “Does anybody know what taxes are?”

And for five years straight, I think, I have gotten the same type of response: “They're a kind of car. And they drive other people around.” No, not taxis. Taxes. “Oh, no, we don't know anything about that.”

Of course they don't. Taxes are one of those cruel realities of life that you just have to learn by experience. There's a certain level of beautiful innocence in a child who doesn't know anything about taxes. Or the governments who use them. Or the governments who misuse them. Children are oblivious to this entire concept. And, in this case, ignorance is bliss.

Right now, we are in the midst of a heated season of political strife. Controversy, arguing, and mudslinging are everywhere. And while I generally stay away from anything political in my sermons, our Gospel lesson for today has handed me on a golden platter an opportunity to address the upcoming election.

But lest you worry that the next few minutes will become yet another political ad, speech, or commentary that you get more than a enough of at home and don't want to hear more of from the pulpit, let me reassure you that we will be sticking to the text at hand.

And it begins with a rather bold example of political maneuvering by the Pharisees. They are seeking to entangle Jesus. They are plotting to entangle him. This isn't a spur of the moment question that they are posing. They have carefully considered the situation and come up with what they think is a perfect trap.

A trap that is so important to them that they are willing to work with the Herodians to make it work. The Pharisees and the Herodians despise each other. They are on opposite ends of the political and theological spectrum. This is no less than Donald Trump and Joe Biden teaming up to take down a third party candidate. Which kind of goes to show just how much the Pharisees have begun to hate Jesus.

So these two very different groups of people join forces, approach Jesus, and begin showering him in flattery. “Oh Rabbi, you are so true and teach God so truthfully. We know you don't care one bit about anybody else's opinion and you'd never say something just to look good. So we're really interested in your honest opinion of this.” But then, they drop the bombshell. “*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?*”

There's an old rule of etiquette: Never discuss politics or religion in polite company; it will only cause ill-will and indigestion. Well, what they have just asked is both politics and religion. And it was the source of a lot of ill-will and indigestion in Jewish society.

Because if Jesus says, “Sure, it's lawful. Pay your taxes.” Then the Pharisees will accuse him of being a Roman sympathizer. Of aiding their illegal Roman oppressors. Of agreeing with the statement stamped on every Roman coin that proclaimed Caesar to be a god.

But, if Jesus says, “Absolutely not. I will never support Roman rule.” Then the Herodians will accuse him of being a revolutionary. Of inciting insurrection. Of rejecting Caesar's authority and the law of Rome.

It's supposed to be a Catch-22. A Kobayashi Maru. A no-win situation. And it's one that we often feel trapped in ourselves, I think. How many times have you paid taxes and wondered, “What are these taxes supporting?”

We have an election coming up. Maybe your candidates will win. Maybe for the next few years, you will happily pay your taxes, confident that they are supporting the work of someone you trust. Maybe you will be proud of the people representing you at the local, state, and national level.

Or maybe your candidate won't win. Maybe someone you don't trust at all will be taking money out of your paycheck, out of your retirement, out of your investments, and using it for things you find absolutely abhorrent. Maybe the person who supposedly represents you will be someone you don't agree with at all.

Just worrying about that possibility is enough to give many people ulcers. It's enough to make you feel absolutely desperate to make sure your candidates get elected. It's enough to make you turn on your friends and family and neighbors and think truly horrible things about them. Say truly horrible things to them.

But you know what? When you do that, you've already taken from God the things that are God's and given them to Caesar. No matter who Caesar is. No matter how upright Caesar behaviors or how sinful Caesar behaves. When you do that, you have made an idol of Caesar's authority.

Martin Luther writes in the Small Catechism: “You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” This election has become a god for a great many people. These candidates have become gods for a great many Christians.

We are terrified of what will happen if our candidate loses. We love our candidate beyond any reasonable level of honor and respect owed to them. And we trust entirely in the politics, politicians, and political parties of this nation. Our idolatry has become obscene.

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's,” Jesus tells us. What is Caesar's? Nothing, really. But God chooses to grant the governing authorities stewardship over a small segment of our lives for the good of us and our neighbor. And so we give them the honor and respect they are due. And yes, that includes paying our taxes.

What is God's? Everything. Our country, our government, our taxes, our very lives. We render to God the things that are God's when render to God anything at all. “We give Thee but Thine own, whatever the gift may be.”

It all belongs to Him. There is truly no gift that we can give to God that he doesn't already own. Which means that when we are guilty of sin – when we are guilty of fearing, loving, or trusting something above God alone – then have nothing to give God to earn his favor back. It belongs to him. It is already owed to him. And we are unworthy of anything except condemnation.

Just like those Pharisees and Herodians who plotted to entangle Jesus. Just like those same people whom Jesus declared to be hypocrites, putting God to the test. In their attempt at flattery, they had actually hit the nail on the head.

Jesus is true and he does teach the ways of God truthfully. And he does not care about anyone else's opinion, not yours or mine. Nor can he be swayed by appearances. By a foolish attempt to look better in God's eyes. No, he sees us exactly as we are: sinners, unworthy of his love.

And yet, he loves us still. We have nothing to give him, but he gives us his grace. His mercy. His righteousness. We consistently fail, time and time again, to give to God the things that are God's. But he gives to us his very life. Nailed to the cross.

And His body and blood, under bread and wine. That we might have the assurance of sins forgiven. And might, for one brief, shining moment, see past the idolatry of this world. To the truth that it all belongs to him.

That this whole world that seems so often like it is being rendered unto sin, death, and the devil, will actually be rendered unto Jesus Christ on the last day. He is the Lord, and there is no other.

So when our eyes look with fear to the hills and we wonder where our help comes from, we don't turn to Presidents or Governors or County Commissioners or any other prince of this world. No, our help comes from the Lord.

Who made heaven and earth. Who resurrects heaven and earth. Who keeps us from all evil. And who keeps our lives. From this time forth and forevermore. Amen.