

## **October 24, 2023 - Pentecost 21**

### **Prayer of the Day**

Sovereign God, raise your throne in our hearts. Created by you, let us live in your image; created *for* you, let us act for your glory; *redeemed* by you, let us give you what is yours, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

### **Epistle Reading - 1st Thessalonians 1:1-10** *(verses 2-3 printed here)*

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Gospel Reading - Matthew 22:15-22**

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They 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." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

### **Sermon**

We all know how the game is played.

If you have watched a crime drama on TV or at the theatre, you've seen it. The defendant is on the stand, and the prosecutor asks questions designed to catch them off guard, and get them to say something which will demonstrate that they are, in fact, guilty, even though they don't want to admit it. Or the defendant's attorney will ask a prosecution witness a hard question, trying to get the witness to admit that they did *not*, in fact, see what they thought they saw, to convince the jury that maybe the defendant isn't as guilty as they had thought.

You will also see this if you watch Parliamentary hearings, or Congressional hearings on C-SPAN. The governing party will call a witness who will back up their party's position on an issue. But when the Opposition party gets a chance to ask questions, they will ask something *completely* unrelated to the issue at hand, trying to get the witness to say something that they can use to discredit the witness, and call into question everything else they have said.

We've all seen it before. It's how the game is played.

Jesus knew how the game was played, too. And he saw right through it.

Two groups, who, the way Matthew tells his story, really had almost nothing in common beside's their desire to get rid of Jesus, come together to try to get him to say something that will embarrass him, at least in the eyes of his fans and followers; and maybe, if they are lucky, also in the eyes of the Roman occupiers (that would actually be preferable, because Rome would get rid of him *for* them).

So they ask Jesus about an unpopular tax which Rome had imposed on this conquered land and people. Whichever way he answers, they think (and hope), he will make enemies of *somebody*.

Jesus starts his reply by calling them hypocrites. He's serving notice, right at the beginning, that he's "on" to their games, and is not interested in playing by their rules.

Then he asks to be shown the coin which is to be used to pay the tax.

This is a subtle maneuver. It reveals that Jesus isn't carrying the money of the empire around in his pocket! He's not playing by the empire's rules, either.

This becomes more interesting when his questioners (detractors and enemies, really) **do** have the coin. They **are** carrying it around, **and** making use of it, **and** playing by the empire's rules. Oops.

Then Jesus ask about this coin. "Whose face is on it?" "The emperor's." Big oops.

He continues, "Whose inscription is that?" This is even more damaging to their cause, because the inscription, which they acknowledge **is** the emperor's, says that the Roman emperor is divine! **Bigger** oops.

And the thing about Roman money is that it was only valid as long as that particular emperor was ruling. When the emperor died, all Roman money became worthless, because it "belonged to" the emperor. So either the empire had to mint a whole bunch of new coins (an expensive proposition), or collect all the coins, scratch out the old emperor's name and inscription, and stamp the new emperor's name and inscription on them.

What it boiled down to was that the emperor legally "owned" all Roman money, so all financial transactions using that money were done in the emperor's name, and since the emperor was "divine," it could be argued that every financial transaction using the emperor's money was therefore a religious activity!

**Biggest** oops!

And this is where Jesus really undermines their attempt to embarrass him. He answers them, "So give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and give to God what belongs to God."

This is a really ambiguous answer! "Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor," **sounds** like, "It's ok to pay the emperor's tax, since it's his money." But, if using the divine emperor's money is an act of worship, "Give to God what belongs to God," sounds like they should **not** pay the tax!

What do you do with **that**??

But what comes next is the most revealing part of the story. "*They were amazed, and they left him and went away.*"

I suspect there were a couple of reasons that they walked away from Jesus. The obvious one is that he didn't play their game. He didn't fall into their trap. Instead, he flipped the trap around, so they were caught by it themselves.

But I suspect there was another reason they walked away. Jesus' answer was ambiguous, and we naturally run away from ambiguity. It makes us uncomfortable, because we can't make it clear, or certain, or obvious. In fact, Jesus' answer showed them that they, **themselves**, were walking ambiguities, in spite of the fact that their whole self-understanding was built on being certain. They couldn't cope with the inherent contradictions that Jesus showed them about themselves, so they got out of there as quickly as they could (while still pretending to be dignified, of course).

And this is where **we** enter the picture. We don't like ambiguity any more than they did. We want things to be certain as much as they did. We like hard and fast; we like clear cut; we like precise lines which separate one "side" from "the other."

But Jesus confronts us with the ambiguities inherent in life, where next to nothing is hard and fast, in which next to nothing is clear cut, in which next to nothing has a precise line separating one "side" from "the other."

Whose picture is on the money in **your** pocket? To whom, or what entity, does **it** belong? When we put one of those bills in the offering plate, we claim it as an act of worship, and that's fine; but what is it when we **don't** put it in the offering plate? What is it when we use that money to pay for something which claims it will give us a new identity ("You won't be the same after you buy this

car, or this deodorant, or this computer!”)? Is *that* an act of worship? If so, of *whom*? If not, *why* not? Can we really separate our life into those kinds of categories?

And that’s a relatively small thing! What about the wider world? For instance, who’s the “good guy” in the latest war in the Middle East? Does it really just depend on which country you happen to live in? Or what your current government thinks?

And what does it say about us when we pretend it’s too big for us? When we run away from taking sides, but in so doing abandon the victims of the violence to the machinations of the power people?

We are caught in ambiguities. Our life, our faith, our identity, our relationship with others; *all* of it, is one big ambiguous mess.

So what do we do with *that*?

Here’s the thing. I do not believe, for one *minute*, that Jesus was trying to drive those people away. I think he was inviting them to acknowledge the ambiguities of their position. I think he was inviting them to sit *with* the uncertainty of their lives, rather than distancing themselves from it. I think he was calling them to *give up* their precise lines by which they separated life into easily understood categories, by which they separated people into “us” and “them”, by which they attempted to remove themselves from the messiness of life, and which enabled them to cling to the illusion of nice, neat classifications.

And I think that’s the same invitation Jesus is giving us. It’s ok to acknowledge the fog which surrounds us. It’s ok to admit that we can’t see a lighthouse, or hear a fog horn, or that we’ve lost our compass and have no idea where we are or where we’re going.

And I think it is precisely *here* that Paul’s letter to the church in Thessalonika comes to us with good news.

*We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of **faith**, your labor of **love**, your steadfastness of **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul reminds us that our life of faith is not about certainty, or answers, or categories. Our life of faith is about the gifts God gives us of faith, and hope, and love. Our life of faith is about the *ability* we have to *share* the gifts of faith and hope and love. Our life of faith is about the *commission* we have received to *support* each other, *and* everyone else, as *they* wrestle with the gifts of faith and hope and love.

Let’s be honest. Focussing our attention on these gifts will probably not take our anxiety away! It will not make our lives any less ambiguous.

But holding Jesus’ invitation to sit *with* the ambiguity, while *at the same time* clinging to the gifts of faith and hope and love, can remind us of who God is, and who we are.

And who knows? Maybe we’ll even be able, occasionally, to embrace the ambiguity, and discover that that is *precisely* where Jesus has found us. Amen.

### Prayers of the People

A - Trusting the presence of God with all creation, we offer our prayers for the world God loves, the church God calls, and for all people according to their needs.

[Short pause]

A - God of ambiguity, your grace confounds all our answers, and your presence overthrows all our questions. May we rest in the unknowing, and wait for your wisdom. God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - God of ambiguity, we crave simple solutions to life, but we find that these do not satisfy the real hunger within us. Remind us that life is not about the destination, but is all about the journey.

God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - God of ambiguity, we are surrounded by voices screaming for our attention, and overwhelmed by demands for our loyalty. Remind us again who **you** are, that we may remember who **we** are.

God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - God of ambiguity, your church exists in the middle of conflicting pressures - institution vs. community, self-care vs. outreach, order vs. mercy. Give us faith to live in the tension. God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - God of ambiguity, you are a God of healing who is found with the sick; you are a God of justice who is present with the criminal, you are a God of salvation who is revealed with the lost. Use us, in **our** ambiguity, to touch others in **their** ambiguity, especially those we name before you.

*[Long pause]*

God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - God of ambiguity, we thank you for walking with us. Enable us to embrace the mystery of our own existence, surrounded and supported by your love for all. God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

P - Into your hands we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C - Amen.