

Sunday, October 22, 2017
20th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 24 (Year A)
1 Thessalonians 1.1-10; Matthew 22.15-22
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Fasten your seatbelts! Jesus is getting political!

To be completely transparent, the Bible is inherently political. Not political as we tend to think about it – as in the art and process of governing. But political in the sense of relating to views about social relationships that involve power or authority. From the Greek *polítēs*, meaning citizen. Because frankly, we humans are political beings. Whenever there is relationship between humans, at some point the issue of power and authority, in whatever form that takes, will arise. Your workplace relationships. There are differences in power and authority. Your friendships, maybe not so much. Except when disagreements arise and then one or the other attempts to exercise authority. Your family relationships. Parents have authority over the children. And I'm not even going to touch the issue of authority in spousal relationships.

And when it comes to the Bible, what it really boils down to is that the Bible is the story of God's people. Of our relationship with God. Of our relationship with one another. Of our relationship with those who are "other." The Bible contains the Law, which defines appropriate use of authority and by whom. The Bible contains the history of our relationships and how authority is dealt with, good and bad. The Bible contains the Prophets, which specifically addresses God's authority and power over his people, and their response, positive and negative. The Bible contains the Gospels, which identify a new way of relationship and authority between God and his people. And between God's people. And the Bible contains Epistles that are written under the authority of the Apostles to convey teachings to the Early Church. To paraphrase, whenever two or three are gathered together, there will be politics.

In today's Gospel, Jesus gets political on several levels. There is the complicated relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees. And in this case, the Pharisees have joined forces with the Herodians. This is an antagonistic relationship. Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites. And the Pharisees are seeking to trap Jesus in some sort of blasphemy or even heresy. All of this a demonstration of a struggle for power and authority, if you will, over the religious and spiritual life of the people. Who truly has the religious interests of the people at heart? Whose interpretation of the Law and religious customs is more in keeping with what God truly desires? Associated with all of this is the relationship between Jesus and the people versus that between the Pharisees and the people. And then to further complicate the political, there is the Roman occupation of Palestine and the uneasy relationship between empire and the religious authorities, and how that impacts the people.

That is the set up. The political wrangling behind the question "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" (Mt 22.17b). This is a tricky question. A question that belies a thorny issue. This simple question is meant to elicit a statement on the "proper" relationship of the people to their Jewish heritage, religiously and culturally, and to the Roman Empire. Or on a more basic level, the appropriate authority of Church versus the appropriate authority of the State in the

lives of the people. This question reflects the often divisive issue faced by first-century Jews as to how far they could cooperate with Roman authority and still be considered faithful to their covenant with God. The choice between loyalty to God and obedience to Rome.

Because of the divisive nature of this question, how Jesus answers could seal his fate. How he answers will determine who wins the rights to take him down. If Jesus says that it is lawful to pay taxes to the empire, the Jewish authorities can charge him with blasphemy. For Roman taxes support the emperor, who was revered as a god. And these taxes, in part, went to support pagan temples. What could be argued as a violation of the commandment to have no other gods. If Jesus says that it is not lawful to pay taxes, the Romans would charge him with violating their laws, with sedition. This was a no win situation.

Well, Jesus, as always, finds a way out. Jesus says, “‘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.’” (Mt 22.19-21).

Under the Roman system, the emperor paid to have coins minted for use throughout the empire. Those coins were considered to be the property of the emperor, regardless of who actually had possession. So the coin shown to Jesus already belongs to the emperor. Therefore, it should be given back to him. To return his own coinage to the emperor was a fact of political life. As such, it could not be considered as a sign of abandoning the rule of God. To return to the emperor what is his, therefore, cannot take anything away from God, cannot diminish God’s authority. Jesus’ response leaves no opportunity for his enemies to denounce him to the Romans as a rebel. And religious zealots could not argue that he is disloyal to their faith.

So at face value, Jesus says that it is lawful to pay taxes. But at the same time, in his statement, Jesus recognizes that we live simultaneously in multiple worlds. When it comes to politics, there is secular power and authority of the government. To which we do indeed have to pay taxes and obey a myriad of civil laws. And then there is the authority of the Church. Or even more basic, there is the authority of God over the lives of the people.

Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s. We have seen what giving to the emperor means. Taxes and obeying established secular laws. These make for the smooth running of our secular society. But what about the giving to God part? Since this particular pericope always falls during the time churches typically think about stewardship, this part of the text – “give to God the things that are God’s” – is often used to support the church’s annual stewardship campaign. In support of our obligation to give back to God. To pledge. And while that may be the case, Jesus is actually saying something far more basic. Something far more fundamental about who we are and whose we are.

It is not just about paying taxes. It is not just about pledging to the church. It is about who we give our lives to. Jesus’ audience would have known the biblical teaching that God created humanity in the Divine image. In the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). Just as what is the emperor’s bears his image, Jesus sets up a parallel image that what is God’s bears God’s image. Humans are made in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, we are to give our lives to God,

whose image we bear. A living, visual reminder that God has a claim on every aspect of our lives. Just as the coin, by right of minting it, belongs to the emperor, to give back to God that which, by right of creation itself, belongs to God, means to return all that we are and all that we have to God.

So how does one balance allegiance to these two, often competing, authorities? Jesus doesn't answer the question directly, but throws the issue back on the crowd, who will have to decide for themselves where their loyalties reside. As a result, the hearers of this Gospel lesson also find themselves questioned—whose image do you bear?

Our Epistle reading is a portion of a letter Paul writes to the early church community in Thessalonica, who similarly lived in systems of competing interests and authority. They had turned from Roman civil religion to worship the true God, despite the threat of persecution. Paul encourages their faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He reminds them that they have been chosen by God to make him known through works of faith, through labors of love, and through steadfastness of faith. To make God known by their very examples. In short, by giving their entire lives to God.

In our own time, we find ourselves living in political systems of competing interests and authority. We are part of and in relationship with a secular system that we are bound to by virtue of being citizens and residents of this nation. Bound to uphold the laws of this land. Bound to give to the government that which belongs, by rule of law, to it. And at the same time, we are part of and in relationship with a religious system that we are bound to by virtue of being created in the image and likeness of God. Bound to uphold his laws by virtue of our baptisms. Bound to give to God that which belongs, by covenant, to him.

Just as Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, we, too are therefore to engage in works of faith and labors of love as a sign of our steadfastness of faith in the One who created us and the One we follow, serving as an example of what it means to be Christian. In modern parlance, by the giving of time, talents, and yes, even treasure, to further the work of the Kingdom.

It is up to each of us to discern how we navigate and balance the competing systems we live in. In discerning just what it means for each of us to give to secular society and to government that which belongs to them, and what it means to give to God and his church that which belongs to him, we must first ask ourselves “whose image do I bear?” And then to respond accordingly.