

October 22, 2017/ 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22;

Rev. Joel M. Krueger

"Allegiance Matters"

Our passage from Matthew is another one of those difficult passages that Kate referred to last week, and unfortunately, I wasn't able to pawn it off on her to preach on today.

At first glance, it may appear that Jesus is giving us a lesson about money, and to whom we should give our money. Or we may see this as a lesson about taxes. Should Christians pay taxes to their government? Should one be expected to pay taxes to a government even if it is in occupation of your land and your people? Even if the money pays for the oppression and taking away of your freedom? For the Jewish people of Jesus' time, as well as for our American forebears, and others throughout world history, this was an important question.

But as I read this passage in preparation for today's sermon, it seemed to speak to me at a deeper level. I wanted to know, why these men were asking Jesus this question to begin with? What was their motivation? Were they really asking him to tell them whether a good Jewish person should pay taxes to the Roman authority, and whether that was deemed lawful? And did they mean lawful from a religious point of view, or lawful from a civic point of view?

We are told that Jesus could see right through them, was *"aware of their malice"*, and asked them, *"Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"* And that was it. They weren't sincerely interested in the question about taxes. They wanted to trap him. It was a game of politics that they were playing. And he was on to them.

It is interesting, that Matthew (and Mark, but not Luke and John), includes these two political groups: the Herodians and the Pharisees. The Pharisees we hear about quite frequently in the gospels and are seen as a common opponent of Jesus. But the Herodians are referred to only this one time in Matthew. They are strange bedfellows.

The Pharisees were more of a religious group. They were those who paid strict attention to the keeping of Jewish law, the codes of dress and diet and Sabbath. Strict adherence to their particular way of life was seen as the way to lead a good and righteous life before God, and put one in favor with God. For the Pharisees, the Roman coin that was required to pay the tax to Rome, a coin that held the image of "the divine Caesar", was itself a violation of the first and second commandments of God: *"Thou shalt have no other gods before me; and Thou shalt not make for yourself any graven image."* For them, the use of that coin was sacrilegious.

The Herodians were more a political group. They were supporters of Herod Antipas, the Jewish King put in power by the Roman authorities. They of course, were supporters of the tax.

These two groups differed greatly, but the one thing that united them was their desire to see Jesus eliminated from the scene, and their trap seemed impossible to fail. Either way Jesus answered, he would be in trouble. If he said he opposed the paying of taxes to Caesar, as the Herodians hoped he would, they could accuse him of treason or sedition against Rome. On the other hand, if he responded in support of the paying of the tax, the Pharisees could label him as a Roman sympathizer, and get the Jewish people to turn on him.

His answer caught them completely off guard, confounding and amazing them. Even for us today, Jesus' response is a difficult thing to understand. What exactly is Jesus saying?

Many scholars suggest that Jesus is teaching his disciples that they are to have a dual allegiance, both to the teachings and commands of God and to the government under which they live. The great reformer of Geneva, John Calvin, believed that since God is sovereign of all aspects of creation, not only in the spiritual realm but also in the arena of civic government, that all were to be obedient to the ruling authorities. Martin Luther, another of the great Protestant Reformers, espoused his *"Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms"*, in which he asserts there is the *Kingdom of God* (or of *Christ*), the spiritual realm where the teachings and ways of Jesus must rule in the hearts of all believers, but also a *Kingdom of the World*, which exists for non-Christians, where kings and secular authority rules and in which Christians have a duty to participate, out of love for their neighbor.

But any of us with even an elementary knowledge of history, know that governments and rulers have done terrible and horrific things, not at all in accordance with God's will, which therefore requires us to question such beliefs that connect our faith and allegiance to God, with an equal faith and allegiance to any secular power.

Commentator, Marvin McMickle, Professor at Ashland Theological Seminary (Ashland, Ohio) writes this: *"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" (v.17 RSV). This is not simply a question of economics or politics or dual citizenship; it is essentially a question of conscience. It is a question of what to do when allegiance to Caesar conflicts with our allegiance to Christ. It is a question of what Christians should do when the God they serve and the government to which they have sworn allegiance are pulling them into a situation of divided loyalties."* (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4, p. 191).

We live in very troubling times, and we who live in this country, America, are blessed to have the freedoms to express our thoughts and feelings, to protest, to seek change within our laws and within our social structures and to follow our consciences.

In fact, it has always been my belief that it is the role and responsibility of the Christian, of the Church, and really of all our country's religions, to be the **nation's conscience**. It is our duty, to watch and pay attention to the actions and plans of our nation's leaders, to listen carefully to their words. And to respond as the Spirit moves us out of concern for the moral integrity and the direction they may be leading us in, as well as for the common good of our people, and for the world. To give our allegiance to our country, requires that we first give allegiance to our God and to the love and Spirit of Christ, who lives within us.

Last week, when I was feeling really overwhelmed, by all the stuff in the news, all the tragedy and disaster happening in the world, all the craziness in our political scene, all the dangers being presented by the world's leaders, and just everything that seemed to be going on, I came into this sanctuary. I sat here. I don't know if you'd call it prayer. But I sat and looked at this cross, and was reminded what that is all about. Was reminded of the God that we worship here every week. And was reminded of the thing that has the greatest allegiance in my heart. And at that point, I found peace.

May we find our peace in the one who calls to our deepest selves, fills our hearts with compassion and love, and who informs our consciences. Amen.