

Sermon for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost - Sunday, October 18, 2020

based on Isaiah 25:1-9; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

Preached at

Zion Lutheran Church, Lebanon PA

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Well, I guess I can not contain myself any longer. These scripture readings for today just pushed me over the edge. I usually refrain from addressing anything political in my sermons. But because I am a proud Lutheran theologian and because I stand in the tradition of Martin Luther who was the first theologian to effectively speak to our political life in his pamphlet called “The Freedom of a Christian”, which marks its 500th Anniversary of its publishing this year, I will carefully tread the water of political life. **Please listen very carefully today before passing judgment.**

It is about two and a half weeks before Election Day and the political advertisements are ramping up. Around the country, people have already started mailing in or dropping off their ballots. Both major political parties think that the other one is going to wreak havoc and violence upon the other., that the future of our country is even in jeopardy. Many people wish to stay away from the polls on election day November 3 as fear of the coronavirus, fear of violence and voter suppression grows. There is so much vitriolic dialogue and discord flooding our screens that it is easy, right now, to think that politics is the only thing that matters in our lives. We wonder and worry whether or not someone is liberal or conservative, democrat or republican, left or right, progressive or moderate. Signs are being stolen out of front yards. The upcoming election seems to be everywhere.

It seems that our political convictions have become our identity rather than that of being a Child of God and being One who is created in God’s image like the Bible says that we are.

This attachment to politics right now seems to have taken over how we think and act. For many, the Constitution has become their sacred scripture, the flag has become their cross, and government leaders have become their gods. The pledge of allegiance is now their creed and dare I say, The Star Spangled Banner is their hymn of praise. **We call this CIVIL RELIGION and it is a real thing.** The unfortunate part is that people who practice civil religion don’t even realize that they have unwittingly enmeshed their own personal Christianity with the false idol of patriotism making faith and politics inseparable. Please don’t misunderstand me. There is nothing wrong with patriotism. I am proud to live in this country. My father-in-law and our nephew have served in the military. Our son Jacob continues in the reserves and recently earned his Marine Firearms Coach Pith Helmet. Jacob enjoyed showing it off last weekend as he and his cousin fired guns at targets in the woods. I

am proud of them and of their military service. **But, and listen carefully now, and hear this in the light of the First Commandment, I do not worship my country.** I worship, we worship God, here in this place. More often than not, I am afraid, that those two things are not compatible. **So, why am I bringing this up today?** These scripture readings have forced me to. Isn't the church supposed to stay out of politics?, you might say. Well maybe, but it depends on what you mean by the word "politics".

All 3 readings today focus us on the relationship a believer has with their civil government. Let me show you what I mean. In Isaiah we read about King Cyrus of Persia whom God calls by name to do something, even though Cyrus does not know God. King Cyrus conquered the Babylonia Empire and Cyrus sets the people of Israel free. They had been held captive for about 70 years. King Cyrus acts with compassion and love. The prophet Isaiah in our reading today says that this is a sign of the presence of the liberating God of love, of their Yahweh god.

It might seem odd that a broken, godless, conquering king like Cyrus could be called to do God's work, doesn't it? It is odd and unusual, but so are many Bible stories about people.. This is why we have a responsibility to carefully read and discern whether or not broken people are truly doing God's work.

Please remember your history. Adolf Hitler used Jesus' own words to immobilize the German Churches as he condemned and put to death over 6 million Jews.

Please remember that thousands of landowners in this very nation twisted the scriptures to condone the enslavement of millions of people for more than 300 years. The racial scars left behind still cause violence today in our country in places like Charlottesville, Portland, Kenosha and Louisville, as you know.

So, how do we know when God is present in the words and actions of the most unlikely people? Well, it is a bit easier than you might think. For when we see love and compassion for other people being expressed and acted upon, when we see grace and hope lavished upon those who are marginalized, scared, hurting. When we see the foreigner embraced, the sick healed, the hungry fed, the thirsty quenched, the captive liberated, the homeless sheltered, when we see these things happening, then we know that God's hand is in it. Just read Jesus' words in Matthew Chapter 25.

But what happens when the civil government doesn't act this way and we can clearly see that God's hand is NOT in it? What do we do when the orphan and widow are cast aside, the

foreign refugee turned away or blocked, the hungry and thirsty ignored and even trampled on, the chains of the captive drawn tighter not loosened, the homeless people exiled to living life under bridges, the animals abused and neglected, the worker injured because of unsafe conditions, the nursing home resident left alone, the courtroom procedures not dispensing justice, **WHAT THEN?**

Martin Luther's colleague, fellow professor Phillip Melancthon wrote in the Augsburg Confession in the year 1530 that AND I QUOTE "Christians are necessarily bound to obey their own magistrates and laws EXCEPT when commanded TO SIN; for then they ought to **OBEY GOD RATHER THAN MEN.**"

It's true that we all don't agree on what things are a sin, but regardless of that, we are all called in our baptism to follow God above all else. To give our allegiance first and only to God. As followers of Jesus we know what God calls us to do. Rushing to judge others is clearly not one of those things.

Paul writes in his oldest letter, in First Thessalonians today, that though the Christians in the town of Thessalonica were being persecuted by the Romans, Paul was proud of them for turning away from the Roamn idols, instead they turned towards God. This is exactly the idea that Jesus is trying to get across to the Pharisees and the Herodians when they attempt to trap him with another trick question. They wanted to slander Jesus with treason. Those Herodians, you might recall, have long schemed to get rid of Jesus, whether he was a newborn in a Bethlehem manger or just an itinerant, miracle performing Galilean preacher. The Pharisees distrusted Jesus as much as they distrusted the occupying Romans. But the Herodians, who were also Jewish, were loyal to the Roman government and used their loyalty to their own advantage. The Herodians' loyalty earned themselves great opportunities to accumulate great wealth. One life meant nothing to them. Remember the party request for John the Baptist's head on a platter? **The Herodians and the Pharisees only agreed on one thing. They both wanted Jesus dead.** So when they confronted Jesus that day they used their syrupy sweet voices to say "TEACHER, YOU ARE A REALLY GREAT GUY AND YOU KNOW EVERYTHING. YOU ARE SINCERE. YOU TEACH THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD. YOU TREAT EVERYONE THE SAME. **SO TELL US WHAT YOU THINK, IS IT LAWFUL TO PAY TAXES TO THE EMPEROR OR NOT?**

Of course, Jesus sees right through them. Jesus must have thought, "They want me to make a treasonist statement." But Jesus won't be trapped into it. "SHOW ME A ROMAN COIN", Jesus says. Then Jesus tells them to pay the emperor what is the emperors and give to God what is God's. This is a very clever answer. One that has often been pointed to to justify our

paying taxes. This story smushes together what Martin Luther would call the 2 Kingdoms, the civil kingdom on the one hand and the kingdom of God on the other hand. Luther believed that God worked in both kingdoms, God's left hand in the civil kingdom and God's right hand in the kingdom of God, which the church on earth was supposed to help build.

But Jesus lived 1,500 years before Luther. While Luther was all about theology, Jesus was all about faith. Jesus' answer to the Pharisees and the Herodians that day is not that cut and dried. Jesus' answers never were or are.

So, how would you answer the question about what truly belongs to the emperor? What would you say? Please remember that the emperor Caesar was believed to be divine, a god himself. Can this divine worldly emperor lay claim to all that they had? Caesar would say yes. Caesar claimed a right to everything in the empire by the force of military might.

But we know better than that, right? We know that none of what we have belongs to Caesar. If you know your history, you will know that tea was thrown in the Boston harbor because it was being over-taxed. Watch the Hamilton musical on DisneyPlus if you need a history refresher. Remember that the Thessalonian Christians did not have the same freedom that we enjoy as citizens today.

Nothing belongs to Caesar, or to the civil government, does it? **Because as Christians we believe that all things belong to God. Everything.**

This was Jesus' point. Caesar was empty-handed. **All coins belong to God, you silly Pharisees and Herodians.** Don't you get it? Come on, guys, You should know this. Everything in the universe belongs to God including our lives, even the lives of our civil leadership, even Cyrus of Persia, Pilate of Palestine and his boss Caesar of Rome.

God chooses to love us and care for us. God's hope is that all people, all of them, will do the same. That is, love and care for all people that God has created. The hope is that the civil leadership of every nation will do the work of God in the world. In the 1540's, the princes in Luther's day had to put down the rioting peasants, it was the right thing to do. Churches were being destroyed. Beautiful works of art ruined. It had to be stopped. During the Renaissance and the Reformation, the seeds of democracy were being planted.

Yes, my friends in the faith, we are called in our baptism to do God's work in the world. All of us. Our baptismal promises charge us with being a voice for those who have been silenced, speaking up for right when there is wrong, standing up with those who can not stand up for themselves.

We are invited to work through our system of civil government for the common good, Luther would say. For the good of all people, to those who are hungry for education, those who need health care, , those on the margins, those who thirst for equity in life, those who are captive to addiction and violence and the selfish accumulation of wealth. Whether people know God or not, we are called to work towards a world in which all know God's love and mercy and grace.

To end this longer than usual sermon, please remember Isaiah's words today. "I call you by name though you do not know me. I am the Lord and there is no other, besides me there is no god. I form light and I create darkness. I make weal and create woe. I, the Lord do these things.

No emperor does this. No civil government does this. But God does these things because everything and everyone belongs to God. Todo el mundo, All in the world. "Don't you see?", Jesus says. When they heard this, they were amazed and they left him and went away."

You can keep reading in Matthew's story to see what will happen next. The Sadducees will come to Jesus and claim that there is no resurrection from the dead.

Aren't they going to be surprised when they hear the good news...

Amen and Amen.