



Pastor Ken's Sermon

SERMON – 20TH PENTECOST

MATTHEW 22:15-22

OCTOBER 18, 2020

"IS IT POSSIBLE"?

Here are a few questions for you; *"Did you walk to church this morning, or do you hate exercise? "Do you have a savings account, or do you care for the poor?" "Are you a Christian, or are you an American?"*

Welcome to the world of false distinctions - "either/or's" that really aren't. Is it possible to ride in a car to church and still like exercise and be concerned about the environment? Is it possible to have an afternoon meal at your dining room in your nice home and still care about those who this afternoon may enjoy neither? Is it possible to be a Christian observant of your faith and still be thankful for and observant of America's liberties and responsibilities?

Our Lord was asked, by folks with a clear agenda – entrapment, *"is it possible for a Jew to pay taxes to a pagan emperor?"* The question was asked to create a false distinction between two seemingly competing interests...government and religion. While remaining observant of their Jewish faith, could someone pay money to an empire that scorned that faith? It was a false distinction. Jesus' response makes that clear. Give to government what it asks - to God what he asks. Jesus used a coin to make his point.

He could have made it without anyone producing a coin, but by having someone pull one from their purse Jesus had a visual too good to pass up. On it was the *"likeness"* of the emperor. On it was *"his inscription"* calling himself *"son of god...high priest."* For a Jew to even have one clanging in his pocket was pretty suspect – *"though shall not make for thyself any graven image"*, and all that. Bu Jesus wasn't interested in accusing anyone – he's in his teacher mode - *"then give back to Tiberius what looks like him and give back to God things that look like him."*

That word translated for us as "portrait" is "icon" - also translated as likeness". In Genesis 1:27 it says *"then God created man in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them"*. The word translated as "image" in Genesis 1:27 was "icon". Jesus is appealing to creation. He has little interest in church-state debates – in the ancient near-East those kind of distinctions that so animate us would have been almost unthinkable – to a Jew you couldn't get a razor's edge between God and history and the affairs of nations. Good golly, look what Isaiah says about Cyrus, the Caesar of his day – how God *"takes hold of his authority (his right hand) and accomplishes what he pleases."*

How can we live in the world, but also give to God our very lives? Is it possible, we ask, to make use of the world and still give precedence to our faith? This tension has always existed in our Lutheran tradition, and generally we have come down on the side of saying that God works through both, through the world to maintain good order, through faith, or the church, to change our hearts and minds to be like Christ. But now we're not so sure.

We don't see the Spirit of God moving in our or any nation. It's a stretch for us to think God might be taking Donald Trump or Joe Biden's "right hand" and accomplishing His will – unless we happen to be partial to one candidate or another and their policies – in which case we might, wrongly, see almost divine, messianic qualities "in our man...in our woman."

Our story from Matthew cautions against that. "Give back to Caesar" meant something that glorified him – which in this case amounted to a coin. Give back to God what glorifies Him means your very self "*even if at the same time you find yourself a citizen placed by the will of God under a government*". Citizens have always needed to "test the spirits" to see that what they "give to the nation" does not impair giving to God first allegiance. The world is well endowed with political messiahs captivating people who have lost, or lost the perspective of their faith.

Remember in whose likeness you are made, and who gave his away so that you may live eternally, '*so that whatever we do, whether in word or deed, we do it all in the name of Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him*'. In the end, our story from Matthew asks of us '*what of any account is left to give the Caesars who govern us when you've already given your life to Jesus?* What makes for a good citizen? Do these things not first make for a good Christian? Is there anything in Paul's famous "*fruits of the Spirit*" ... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control that could land a person in jail, at least in this country?

19th century's abolitionists or 20th's civil rights marchers or Vietnam War protestors or people accused of blocking entrances to abortion clinics may tell you that in their understanding of peace or kindness or love, yes, it can. Still, the Apostle Paul complimented - praised is a better word, not only the faith but the faithful behavior of the Thessalonians in our lesson today. It's quite simply impossible that Paul would think that their faith alone apart from their faithful striving to be exemplary citizens in a city ruled by Rome and populated by no small number of synagogues and where he'd been expelled for preaching the gospel is what made their reputation "*known everywhere*" and a model for all Christians. The Thessalonian believers didn't buy into false distinctions – "either/ors" that really weren't.

Here's the thing...when you're living for Jesus it doesn't really matter where you live. If you are being a faithful Christian you have already "*given to God that which is God's*." Anything else you might be asked of by the Caesars and Cyrus's of this world who are in power today and gone tomorrow, is according to Jesus, so much couch coinage. Beware of false distinctions – either/ors that really aren't. It is possible that wherever God will lead us as a nation is better than where we've been – though it may not be exclusively "your side" that God uses to do that. Martin Luther once said; "*I have held many things tightly in my hand, and have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands that I still possess*"? Give somebody your taxes...or in a few weeks your vote – give God your trust and you'll amaze people! AMEN