

Sermon for Sunday, October 18, 2020 - “Living *with* the Powers of This World but *for* God”

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Jesus says, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and give to God the things that are God’s.” Sometimes that gets interpreted as a call to keep politics and religion separate. That kind of separation can sound appealing, especially right now. I am really going to miss gathering with my extended family this Thanksgiving, but I think I’ll be OK without the political arguments that have gotten nasty in recent years.

It’s tempting in these days to want our faith to provide a refuge from politics. Except the thing is, Jesus is actually engaging in some political sparring with people who are plotting against him. The question he is asked and the guidance he offers are both so relevant and important for how we live in our current political context. How do we engage with the government as people of faith?

Jesus is approached by two groups of religious leaders who normally can’t agree on anything. They each feel threatened by Jesus so team up to trap him with a political question - how should good religious people respond to corrupt government. One group, the Herodians, seem to have taken the approach of going along to get along. They collaborated with Rome and the puppet King Herod. Many criticized them for this but it’s likely they were trying to appease the Roman empire to protect Jewish religious freedom. The other group, the Pharisees, advocated separation from Rome. They emphasized loyalty to God alone and strict adherence to God’s laws.

So, when these two groups ask Jesus if it is lawful to pay taxes to Rome, they are trying to trap him. If he says no, the Herodians could say look, he’s advocating that people break the law; this is going to bring down the wrath of Rome. We shouldn’t make waves. If he says yes, the Pharisees could say he’s not really a Jew. Jews should never show loyalty to any government, only to God.

Jesus refuses to give a simple ‘yes or no’ answer to their question about paying taxes. He asks them to show him a coin. This can seem like he’s dodging the question as so many of our leaders do now; but in reality, Jesus is convicting them. He says, “Show me the coin used to pay this tax.” They hand it over and likely realize, too late, that Jesus has actually trapped them. “Whose image is this”, Jesus asks, “and whose title is inscribed upon it?” I can picture the leaders cringing as they answer, “the emperors.” They are busted. They aren’t supposed to have a coin with the emperor’s image on it in the temple because the emperor claims the title: Most High God. The religious leaders well know that such a title belongs only to God who is so beyond our images and imaging. Jewish law prevents them from carrying a graven image in the temple, much less the image of a false god.

Jesus convicts these religious leaders of their participation in a corrupt government. Even the separatists were influenced by Rome, carrying its coins and images. And, those who were trying to go along to get along were breaking God's law. They all were trapped in an oppressive system. They all were complicit.

Our context is different, but we, too, are all complicit with the sin and corruption in our own country, with the powers and principalities of this fallen world. As Dr. Rolf Jacobsen of Luther Seminary points out, "I'm thinking about the money in my own wallet and the ways that it has graven images of my own country's false gods and statements of faith that run counter to the God whom I follow. On the bills and coins in my wallet are the faces of some slave owners, the perpetrator of the genocidal trail of tears, the images of some quasi-religious civic symbols that are not of my Christian faith, and the words 'In God We Trust'— but the God to which these bills and coins bear witness is not the God of the cross. So, what are we to do? Trapped in a fallen, sinful world, are we to flee the world and separate or cloister ourselves? That's one option. Are we to try to burn the system down and revolt against the empire? That's another option.

Dr. Jacobsen continues, "It seems to me that Jesus' words, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and give to God the things that are God's,' at once free us to live *with* the emperor but to live *for* God. The kingdoms of this earth all around us trap us in their sickening realities. But the kingdom of God—which is not of this world—is even now breaking into this world and freeing us to live lives of faith in God and love of God and neighbor." *End quote.*

We all are shaped by corrupt and corrupting forces and images. Yet, what matters more is that we bear the image of God, for we are all created in the image of God. We all claim a variety of titles: Democrat, Republican, Baby Boomer, Gen Z, feminist, libertarian, conservative. And, as was true of the Herodians and the Pharisees, all of these groups are complicit in some form of injustice. Yet, those are not the titles that define us. We all bear the most important title, Beloved Child of God. The kingdom of God is always breaking into this fallen world to remind us of who and whose we are. We are created in the image of God. We are inscribed with the cross of Christ and called the Beloved Child of God. We are set free from the power of sin to live for God and neighbor.

So dear People of God, how are we living *with* the emperor, with the powers and principalities of this world, but living *for* God and God's priorities?

How are we, as people of faith, engaging with our government? And, how are we practicing love of God and love of neighbor in this fallen world? We need to wrestle with those questions especially as citizens of a democracy in an election year. One resource to aid our deliberation is the recent Social Message on Government and Civic Engagement adopted by the ELCA Church Council. This social message comes out of engagement with scripture and Lutheran teaching about how God works in the world. Lutherans teach that God works both to create faith through word and sacrament and to bring about human flourishing and enough for all through human roles, structures and institutions. I'll share more about how to find this at the end of worship.

This social message articulates the Lutheran understanding that government can be a force for evil or a force for good, but that God intends for government to protect all people and to enable human societies to flourish. Government is intended to do what churches, families, individuals, and businesses cannot do on their own: protect and coordinate the well-being of individuals, communities, and creation.

ELCA social teaching holds that all residents of the United States have a responsibility to make government function well, not to abandon our democracy, but to engage it in a spirit of robust civic duty. This social message also asks us to assess our government and to direct our civic engagement by keeping in mind a key question - "Is the neighbor being served?" In seeking to answer this question, the social message lists 14 guides for assessing the performance of government, including:

Unrestricted participation

Neighborly service to strangers and Recognizing neighbors, not just citizens

Adequate regulation

Protecting Individual Freedom and Accepting limitations on freedom

Respect and dignity

Maintaining the distinction between the role and the person filling it

These are some of the guides for determining if the neighbor is being served by the government. Lutherans will disagree about how best the government should do these things and how best to serve the neighbor in complex circumstances. But, serving the neighbor must always be the question that guides us in our political life. As we live *with* the emperor but *for* God, we are called to live out love for God and neighbor through our civic engagement, striving to help our government function well so that all of God's people can flourish.

We can do this, you can do this because you are God's beloved child, marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit.

You bear the image of God.

You are set free to honor the image of God in your neighbor.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.

The ELCA Social Message on Government and Civic Engagement and a 2 page visual summary is posted on the Good Shepherd website

<https://www.goodshepherddecorah.org/social-justice/>