

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost – 2023

Isaiah 45:1-7

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

Do you believe that Jesus ever adopted someone else's agenda over His own? Do you believe that Jesus ever peddled someone else's religious campaign, someone else's *political* vision? Obedient to the Father, that's what we know about the Son of God. He came not to do His own will but the will of the One who sent Him (John 6:38). Would you agree that the Lord Christ never allowed Himself to be conscripted as someone's lieutenant, someone else's wingman, their spiritual muscle? Did Jesus ever lend His name to some other entity in order to provide that other entity with the sheen of righteousness? No? Why do you suppose that is? Does the church have her own mission that is entirely separate from what goes on in the world around us?

How well has the church governed herself in this regard? Has the church ever lent her good name to some worldly entity and then regretted that association? To be sure, the church must speak; the church must address contemporary issues that arise in our culture, in the world. We are to be salt and light – putting the light of Christ on a stand so that others may see what is good and wise and benevolent and truthful. But the church speaks as the church, not as a prop to some other agency, advancing some other agenda. Do you agree?

Early in the book of Revelation, God pronounces judgment on seven churches. Ephesus is the first and God sees and knows their virtue, enduring difficulty patiently and, as He says, "bearing up for my name's sake" (Revelation 2:3). Then the Lord speaks these words: "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove the lampstand from its place" (Revelation 2:4-5). Seemingly, the church at Ephesus got caught up in something superfluous, they began to major in minors, they took their eye off of the cross, off of their crucified King, off of the Word and the Sacraments. Did Covid take your eye off of the cross? Do world events begin squeeze out Christ's death and resurrection? Does a political season ever supplant the First Commandment – You shall have no other gods?

Two strange bed-fellows came to Jesus with a game of gotcha. The Pharisees and the Herodians weren't palsies. The Pharisees despised Rome and their tax and the Herodians were down with it. So it's kind of strange to see them team up to trap the Lord Christ, but hey, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Both of these groups have no real use for Jesus, except to dispatch him, and they dream up a way to impale the King of kings on the horns of a dilemma. It is a political question. The tax; is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? They are crass hypocrites. You hate hypocrisy, right? You can recognize it when you see it, right? Jesus saw it. They attempted to flatter the Lord but their hearts are full of deceit, full of pride and villainy. I have to admit, it is a crafty question, a clever question. If Jesus says that the tax is legal He will flame out the Jews who are suffering under Rome's iron fist. If Jesus says that the tax is unlawful, He will become an enemy of the state. Either way, Jesus appears to be cooked by the question.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that Jesus is ever cooked by a crafty question? I hope that you remember this all your life – the truth can't be trapped. Truth is more agile than deception.

The truth sets us free. Align yourself with deception and you will soon align yourself to a prison cell – spiritual, emotion, a place that crushes your spirit. The Lord Christ can't be trapped, and He never forgets His first love. "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax" (Matthew 22:18-19). I know that you know this already but I'm going to tell you anyway: Your Lord is brilliant. Jesus Christ is glorious and amazing and remarkably agile and brilliant of mind and He never forgets His first love. The coin has Caesar's image on it. It's Caesar's coin. It has Caesar's inscription, his likeness, his authority is wedded to the coin – it belongs to Caesar this coin. Jesus asked them as much and they confessed what everyone knew, what was patently obvious. Then He said it: "Therefore render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). That, my friends, is magnificent.

It wasn't a political answer. It doesn't have anything to do with the legality of the tax. Caesar's coin; if he wants it back, give it to him. It's the rest that is priceless. Render unto God what is God's. Man was created in God's image, in His likeness. Male and female, created He them – the Almighty imprinted on the human race His image. Our first parents were minted in paradise. Have you ever seen a coin stamped? Common metal becomes valuable as a mere slug is imprinted with an image that has the wealth of the nation behind it. One moment it is ordinary, the next it is a coin with quantifiable value, inherent value. God's image was imprinted on Adam and Eve. Humanity was the Creator's coin. His inscription of love and holiness and beauty animated their being. And that image was lost. Rebellion, hypocrisy, deceit, and death; what lives in us? You and me; what lives in us? Lust and pride and selfishness of endless variety; but God wants His coin. You; God sent His Son to find what was lost, to recover what was His, to render unto God what belongs to God.

Jesus is the exact image of God (Colossians 1:15). True God and true man in one person; Jesus acts with a radical devotion to His Father and a radical love for you. You are God's. You are not your own. You were bought at a price. God came searching for His coin, for you, when you were lost in sin and death. He didn't send a tax collector. God the Father sent love incarnate, truth incarnate, life incarnate. God sent a redeemer. You are sitting in this Divine Service because God sent His Son to claim you. On the cross, Jesus rendered both Himself and you to the Father. What was imprinted on Christ as He was whipped at the scourging post? That horrible suffering, which tore His flesh, was for my sin. Glory; God unleashes His glory as He suffers, as He pays the price for you to come home. Imprinted on Him was our lust, our pride, our relentless self-pity, our lack of repentance, our greed and our self-righteousness. Look at His crucified image – that is the holy coin of God, your redemption, your freedom, your value.

You've been made new. That image, Christ crucified, has been imprinted on your being. You've been baptized. You are a new creation; the old has gone, behold, the new has come. Render unto God what is God's. Christ did that for all of us. And we have been minted by Jesus' death and resurrection. What now? You bear the image of the King. What now? Women, you are regal, queenly, honored and esteemed by God Himself. Hold yourselves as daughters of the King, which you are. Be faithful and teach your daughters to be faithful. Honor God in your body. Remember how high your station is. Men, you are to be the strength of the family, the culture and this congregation. Be quick to sacrifice, eager to serve and teach your sons the way of Christ – the first are to be last.

Render unto God what is God's. That offering plate, as it passes and you put your tithe in there – good – you are rendering unto God your gift. As you do this, enlarge the gesture in your heart. Put yourself in that plate; render unto God all that you are. Hypocrisy cannot live in a heart that does this. We will not forget our first love. We drink deeply of the truth. Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. We ingest that wondrous truth and we stay agile in His Word. We are forgiven, heaven is our home, death has no sting, and Christ is with us. He renders Himself to us in this place. He withholds nothing from us but gives us the bounty of His grace, His love, and His life. Knowing this we are eager to render unto God what is God's. What a beautiful life that is.