

Sermon – “To the Emperor, To God”

Sunday, October 22, 2017

Scripture Readings: Exodus 33:12-23, Matthew 22:15-22

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Our first reading is from the book of Exodus, as Moses speaks to God of being present with him and with the people. Hear God’s word to you from Exodus 33:12-23.

¹²Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ ¹³Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” ¹⁴He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” ¹⁵And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

¹⁷The LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” ¹⁸Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” ¹⁹And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” ²¹And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²²and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

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Our second reading is from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 22, verses 15 through 22. Here we see Jesus approached by some who act as though they seek to learn, but really are aiming to get him to say something which discredits him and potentially endangers him. Listen for God’s word to you.

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” ²¹They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

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“Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.” The story opens with devious minds scheming to maneuver Jesus into saying something dangerous. A religious leader with numerous followers preaching against paying taxes would surely be something the political authorities would take note of and be unlikely to tolerate, and this seems to be what the Pharisees are hoping for.

This meeting, a confrontation disguised as a rabbinical teaching moment, is stuffed full of irony from the beginning. “Teacher, we know that you are sincere,” are the opening words of these entirely insincere questioners of Jesus. He knows what they are after, but has an answer. They ask their question, meant to corner him: “[W]e know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

He offers his own question in return: whose image is on the coin? His final answer silences them: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

The irony is all the greater when we consider that the people who just set out to discredit him departed having only increased his reputation; not only did he answer them wisely, but those opening words of theirs remain in the air—these Pharisees have just publicly described Jesus as a sincere, impartial teacher of God’s truth, and nothing in the scene has happened to undermine that description. Their own words have made him out to be a good, honest, fair, Godly teacher, and they can’t take them back now. Their gamble having backfired, they “left him and went away.”

This feels like such a rich outcome, looking at it from our perspective as followers of Jesus, that it is hard to avoid falling into one of the potential traps in our own approach to this passage. It is tempting basically to hear this as simply a story in which we get to hear of Jesus’s clever verbal victory over those trying to knock him down, feel good for being on his team, and do nothing more. “Hah, look how Jesus out-smarted those guys who were trying to do him wrong! Serves them right! We’ve definitely got ourselves on the winning side.”

Indeed, Jesus was clever. Matthew and Mark show us this regularly, and there is satisfaction in seeing hypocrisy defeated. But hearing this story primarily as a kind of self-congratulatory talk for the Jesus team is a mistake, and it’s a deeper one than we might think.

Let’s back up for a minute or two. We are thinking about mission this Sunday. Mission is about how our faith is carried out into the world. And this moment, our own particular moment in the world, is remarkably filled with questions of how faith is lived out in public. Sure, religious participation may be significantly down in the last few decades, and more people say they have no faith than ever before, but at the same time, it seems as though half of the news we read, in politics or anything else, is about religion, too.

Extremists march in one place, others blow things up in another, all voicing Godly devotion as the reason. And with less religion overall, but with more religious diversity among us than ever before, tension is seemingly growing between the laws devised by the state and the lives of individual practitioners of various faiths, including our own.

The questions of allegiance to state versus allegiance to God, the morality of taxation and of what we pay our taxes to fund; these are not just questions of people in Jesus's time, but of our own as well. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?" How do we resolve the unavoidable fact that our mission as the church will, always and everywhere, differ from the goals of those having authority over the legal framework in which we live?

This is always a question, but right now it can often be seen as open clashing. We hear constantly of the political clout of people described as "evangelicals," a word which ought to catch our own attention when used to describe movements in our culture, since "evangelical" comes from "evangelism," which comes from the Greek word "evangelion", meaning "good news" or "gospel." Bringing to the whole world the good news of Christ's Gospel; that is, being evangelical in a very literal sense, is exactly what mission is about, so we who seek to be a missional church probably should take note of what, exactly, is going on out there and being described as or understood as evangelical by the world. For sometimes we and others in the church bear good news, and sometimes we're bearing something else. We have to be purposeful about what the world hears the church as saying.

And right now, as Culture Warriors loudly shout back and forth about the state of things in today's society, with divisions not only between Christians and others but between Christians and other Christians, I think it might be important to point out that the fundamental factor that makes or breaks us as missionaries, as evangelists, as bearers of the Gospel, is not actually our political beliefs. There are certainly right and wrong political beliefs, but people with a remarkably wide range of political beliefs can be received as carrying love with them where they go—or not. I think the thing we have to watch for in ourselves is more subtle, and it is not a political matter but a theological one.

In our creeds we proclaim salvation coming from Christ, but we don't always elaborate on that idea. Several particular notions are commonly in competition with one another when it comes to understanding what it means to be Christian, and we're not even always fully aware of which one we're attaching to at any given moment.

One common view of the Christian life might be something like this: if you live as a good enough person and go to church, you'll get into heaven. In fact, despite the fact that the idea that you can *earn* your way to salvation has technically been considered a heresy since at least the 5th Century,¹ this might be the *most* common basic understanding of Christianity in our culture, universal enough that I hardly need explain the idea any further.

As I said, church theologians and teachers have tried to push people away from this notion for centuries, but it does at least have one good side effect: people feel pressure to act well toward others and to do what Jesus said. In the course of trying really hard at this, a great many people—Martin Luther not least of them—have eventually run up against the hard wall of impossibility, the inescapable need for grace, and encountered Christ in the process.

¹ "Pelagianism" is the name given to the teaching that we are not bound by sin from the start ("original sin") and that true moral goodness is fully within the power of our wills to choose—that God's grace is not necessary; rather, perfection is attainable by our own choice. It was discussed and declared to be a falsehood (or "heresy") by two ecumenical councils of the church in the 5th Century, and is considered an erroneous theology by most or all major branches of the church. That has not prevented it from being immensely widespread as a subconscious mental model of how Christianity works, especially today.

But there's a slightly different version of this theology which I've noticed in common circulation lately among Christians, and it makes the same error in a more insidious way. This variation could be described this way: being Christian is a matter of achieving salvation by means of having "backed the right man," Jesus, and getting rewarded at the end, once his victory is final, for having been a supporter of his. Just like those who endorse a political candidate often expect they will land some kind of job or other prize if their candidate wins, this outlook is commonplace among the faithful, too. Why are we confident in our salvation? We picked the winning team, got behind the right savior, and eternal life is our reward. Or in other words, Christianity is about attaining a place in the book of life given out by God as an act of political patronage.

This doesn't sound quite right when described so openly as that, but I think if we consider it honestly, there is a little bit of that temptation in each of us. We can probably all see that kind of tendency in those Christians who use excessively transactional language to describe their salvation. For those of us here in mainline denominations who use a little bit less language of "getting saved" and the like, it might be more subtle, but we still put ourselves on "the right side of history," "the right side of theology," and all the other right sides, and we very much like to think we've got God's favor coming to us as a result.

We certainly prefer it to the alternative (which I haven't named yet). The alternative to salvation as an earned reward is salvation as an act of Godly charity. And most of us don't like receiving charity very much. (That attitude, of course, will get us into trouble right quick, because at least half of our hatred of charity from other people, and all of our hatred of charity from God, is pure, simple pride, and pride is still an error and a sin.)

But whether we like it or not, the only alternative to salvation as an earned thing is salvation as an unearned thing. If we have not made ourselves deserving of it, then we can only have been given it as a gift. Being Christian in this conception of it is not a matter of wearing a badge endorsing Jesus for the office of Messiah; it is a matter of experiencing an offering of grace. It is not about us making the right call on whom to support and earning something in return; it is the process of receiving and responding to a desperately needed grace given us in Jesus Christ.

It is Christianity as the receiving of a gift and as a response to it, and I think it is the only Christianity that stands the test of reality. We will never climb to heaven on the backs of our works, and the idea that God needs and cares about our support in the same way a political candidate does is ridiculous. But God did love us "while we were yet sinners,"² and came to find us when we went astray. And this makes living as a disciple somewhat different.

Being Christian, if you think it is just a matter of declaring for the right team, doesn't really have anything to it other than sitting back and waiting for your reward to come in. There's a little bit of temptation to think this way when we read passages of Jesus outfoxing the Pharisees. "Boom!" we could think. "Another point for our leader!" In our self-satisfaction at being one of those with Jesus, we could easily fail ever to bother getting around to the question of what it means in real life for us to "give...to God the things that are God's."

² Romans 5:8 (*Revised Standard Version*), and the larger passage from which it comes, Romans 5:1-11.

For the theology of salvation as a reward just for backing Jesus doesn't make for much in the way of *doing* anything. It's attractive that way. It lets us have the self-regard of believing we are earning eternal life, but drops the idea that we have to work at it. We just need to be a member of Jesus's side. And it certainly doesn't lead to much in the way of mission, except in the form of condescending words, declaring our own group to be the saved group and telling others they had better get on board if they want it, too. It makes us think we are entitled to salvation, and it makes us therefore *act* entitled to salvation.

But this doesn't sound a whole lot like the mission that Jesus himself lived out, or like the life he told his followers to live.

How are *we* going to live? Being Christian is found somewhere else. Our mission is to give what we have gotten. It is in fully recognizing the deep gift of forgiveness and extending the same forgiveness ourselves. It is in hearing the promise of God and pursuing it ourselves. It is in receiving with gratitude a way back to God, no matter where or how lost we might have gotten, and thankfully and joyfully sharing the way with others. This is our mission. Let us go forth, find it, and live it. Amen.