

**Gospel: Matthew 22:15-22****Glory to You, O Lord**

15Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] 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.

The Gospel of the Lord

**Praise to You, O Christ**

*God of power and might, love and grace, we are made in your image and we are called to shine your light into the world around us. We are challenged by competing gods and distractions to your purpose. Help us to see you clearly when we are confused and misled for there are those who would challenge what we believe. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer.*

When I read this Gospel for the first time as I was preparing my sermon, I had a strange feeling of politics as usual. Right off the bat, the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians did not see eye to eye on most things but as a group they both were irritated by this upstart Rabbi out of Galilee whose popularity was growing. He even had the audacity to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey and the crowds lost their minds shouting Hosanna! His poll numbers were challenging theirs and he was saying things and acting in ways that made them look less than honest. They were desperate to catch him in a question he couldn't answer and it was almost like Nancy Pelosi and Sarah Palin were working together to get rid of him - not likely **they** would be working together now is it. You say politics have no place in church? Read the Gospels! Human beings and politics go hand in hand - the constant fighting for dominance, power and oneupmanship is not only found in Washington DC.

Jesus sees it coming - he hears the sneer behind the flattery about his sincerity and truth and then the question about taxes is laid before him like a trap. He sees and understands their hypocritical behavior to be born out of their desire to trick him but what they didn't count on is that this backwoods carpenter turned Rabbi is smarter than they are. He asks for a denarius for two reasons - 1. to show them whose face is on it and 2. to make a point. As Pharisees, they should not have a denarius on their person, it is a graven image of Tiberius and Augustus Caesar with a faith statement claiming Caesar as the son of god. He wasn't about to get caught up in their foolishness and says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesars but adds, and give to God what is God's!"

They were amazed and they left him and went away. If we go back to Genesis and the creation story we read that WE are made in the image of God. As God's image bearers, it isn't just what we look like that points to God - most of don't look very godlike. It is what we act like that makes us stand out. For Jesus in the entirety of his ministry, was the call on his followers to live in the midst of community, in the world and make God's presence known by their love and forgiveness and honesty to each other. To be holy and righteous in seclusion is one thing and many are not called to that kind of life but to live in the world but point to God is a much bigger challenge that we can't possible live up to without divine help. Knowing the Spirit is with us, we go out into the world to love and serve and to let people know how much God loves them.

Life in the 21st century looks a bit different than it likely did in the 1st century but human behavior is probably not much different. Reading Paul's letters to the first congregations frequently reminds me of church conflict today. We have competing gods in our life and the one who gets the most attention is the one who has the most power over us. Our need to be right leads us to bitter political arguments with our friends, family members and total strangers. Our values are often betrayed by our actions. Anger, vitriol, contempt and empty rhetoric is the name of the game and it is difficult to find a place where we aren't caught up in conflict and disagreement - even our churches and neighborhood homeowners associations are places of back-biting and mud-slinging. As a people, we have forgotten how to engage in civil discourse. We have forgotten that we can disagree with others and still be friends. We can actually vote for different people and still sit down at the table together and enjoy a good meal. It will not be the end of the world if your candidate doesn't win. We face this every four years, you think we would realize this. You may be disappointed but life will go on. We who bear God's image, even dimly, far outnumber corrupt politicians. We can make this world a better place when we live the way God has called us to live. Even corrupt politicians are forgiven.

How WE live and what WE do when we are angry or disappointed shows the world what rules our life. We are God's children and if God Almighty is the focus of our love and allegiance, we will act in ways that are loving and and grace-filled, regardless of what life dishes out, yes, even in a pandemic. If one human leader gets our devotion and focus we will act in ways that point people to that particular leader's political stand and moral compass. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's. Martin Luther, in his two kingdoms theory stated that there is a place for temporal government to keep the peace and provide order in the world. We are to pay taxes that provide the infrastructure to live safely and follow the laws and regulations in our communities that keep that order unless to do so would go against the Gospel. When it does go awry God gives us the strength and the wisdom to stand up and make a difference.

There is much in the world today that is cause for alarm and we can see goes against the Gospel; violence, oppression of people based on the color of their skin or their sexuality, economic inequality where the gap is growing wider between the haves and the

have-nots and exploitation of the powerless. What is a person who is sealed by the Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ to do?

Take a deep breath and pray.

Trust that God is in charge and then follow Jesus into the world to make a difference. We elect governmental leaders to make laws that protect everyone equally. If they aren't doing the job, it is our job to hold them accountable. We don't live in the Roman Empire - we still have the power and responsibility to stand up and call for justice and equality for everyone and then sit down with our neighbors and figure out how to do that. If we trust that God is leading the charge, we can remain positive and optimistic that together we can find a solution but we have to do something - we cannot sit idly by and assume someone else will take care of it. We are in this together, God is leading us and we are God's image bearers to a world that needs more love, civility, forgiveness, equality and justice. We have work to do for our neighbor, for the world and for God's Kingdom - and it is time! Whose image will the world see in you?

Amen and Amen