

What is God's

Menno Mennonite Church
October 22, 2023

Purpose: To examine the allegiances we hold with the Kingdom of God.

Message: We are held within God's hand and called to remember God's call to be other than this world in the midst of any crisis.

Scriptures: *Matthew 22:15-22 (I will read)*, Isaiah 45:1-7 (preferred)

Synopsis: The news of the day can take a lot to make our way through. There are challenges that seem simply beyond us: the generational conflicts of our world, the way our culture and the demands it present change, the calculations of power that would circumscribe us within them. There are challenges of our day and there were challenges in Jesus' day. Here we are given a window into one of the political maneuvers of that was confronting him, a trap with seeming no good answer. Jesus, instead of identifying the choice that would trap him instead differentiates himself by questioning the ownership of the world in the first place.

We are invited to a similar response to know our call and our identity in the world for what it really is: the calling to identify with the kingdom of God first, last and always. Our invitation is remember always that we are of God, come what may.

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.

¹⁶ So 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.

¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said,

"Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?
¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax."

And they brought him a denarius.

²⁰ Then he said to them,

"Whose head is this, and whose title?"

²¹ They 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."

²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

What is in your wallet? No; really; what is in your wallet? Think about it? Take it out if you like, go through what's there while we think together this morning. Consider the various elements of what are in there, what they are and what they say about you. Were you to come across my wallet left where ever it might be left you might have an interesting leads to consider who you are dealing with. You would have the basics: my name, residence and all the rest. The fact that I do not wear glasses at least to drive. You might note what my airline preference is based on my plastic. You would also see I am quite literally a card carrying member of my profession as a pastor as noted by the endorsement of the Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference on my pastor's identity card (something that comes in handy when you are naming yourself as clergy in sensitive locales and don't have the wardrobe people expect to back it up. There are downsides to being of the low church).

Take out your money. Our cash, what little we carry of it anymore, also makes some particular claims about us and who we want to be. They are dollars, and mere notion of representative value that have meaning simply because we collectively have said that it is so (have you ever considered what it would be like to come from another planet and observe the intense scrutiny that we earthlings have for colored bits of paper? It could really get somebody rather confused). Yet they tell a story about us. They carry bits of history—those who led us in the long past. It declares our best intentions: that out of many might come one; and that it is God we trust. There are the symbols and notions of what we have deemed significant to our world; ideals that we might occasionally do well to be reminded of in troubling times. It might even be a way to keep track of who is who.

I watched with an elevated interest the pomp and circumstance that surrounded the death of Queen Elizabeth last year and the ascension of King Charles. Not only is this something that you quite simply don't see every day, it was a curiosity as a in-principal subject of the queen and king within the dominion of Canada, trying to wrap one's head around the notion of the Queen is dead; long live the king was a bit trippy as someone who is rather new to concept.

In the midst of the proceedings, there was something I hadn't previously considered. There would be day-to-day changes, even across the old-fashioned notion of the commonwealth. Money was about to change too. Amid the beavers, loons, and aged prime ministers that grace Canadian money, there too is the monarchy. The queen appears on the 20 dollar bill, and as the head to coins as well. There is no law mandating this; it is just how things are. You put the

monarch on the coins, and when there is a new monarch, there will also be new coins. The inscription on the coins, in case you are wondering, is also telling: the latin translates to “by God’s grace a Queen.” Shortly, there will the inscription of the king there too. The marriage of the divine and the monarchy is alive and well it would seem. The question of what is God’s and what is Caesar’s too I think is alive and well.

Of the wide variety of things that we don’t often turn to the Bible for is political theater. I am not quite sure why: if you actually read it, it is right there, cover to cover. The Bible is the story of God in the midst of a story of people. But where people and power mix, there too will politics be. Perhaps we think it a bit too twisted and dirty to consider as part of The Holy Scriptures. The day-in, day-out backstabbing in the name of power that we shake our head at, and rightly so, is right there on full display as the powers that be encounter the one chosen by God, complete with an all-knowing narrator to spell out the motivations and meanings of what everyone had in mind.

We are so well acquainted with the happening, or at least its trademark saying calling us to “give to Casear” that I think we somewhat miss the point of the conundrum being posed to Jesus, and are given to missing the intent of what’s trying to be accomplished here. Let’s be clear: this is the end game where the powers that be (as all powers do) are simply working on the why of what they knew needed to happen here, not particularly wanting to be enlightened or convinced by the answers that are being given. The game is afoot and this is the shape that it is taking. The flattery that the questioners lay out for Jesus is part of the game. What they say has the advantage of being true. It is precisely because it is true—that Jesus does not work with partiality and that he does not show deference to anyone (namely them) that drives them so thoroughly mad. It is exactly this nature that they blame for his weakness—he doesn’t play the game that they know and love, and they are trying to use that against him. What they could not understand was it was this fundamental power with others that is the heart of Jesus’ ministry and motion in the world.

The leaders want to trap Jesus into the box that they themselves live in as part of empire. The benefits that they receive as people of power place them within the box; they could not be too far afield from the demands of the emperor or they quite simply would not, could not stand. The Herod’s were kept in place just as long as they were useful to control the Jewish population. Yet they could not be too far into the pocket of Rome so they had to appear to be concerned with

the issues of propriety. They could not conceive of power outside of this realm and this way, so they could not conceive or understand that what Jesus was talking about was just such a way. This has been evident throughout this entire discourse, and their response brings the truth of their real allegiance to a point. This is not a conversation about taxes; it's about belonging and citizenry. Whose will do you pray will be done—that of the Holy One or the emperor? Do you belong to the kingdom of God or to the empire? Is your allegiance to the nation where you reside or the Creator of all? In the words of Joshua, “Choose this day whom you will serve.” (Joshua 24:15) The answer cannot be both.

In the last several weeks, we have seen troubling days. The problems are almost too many to count. We grieve the wars and rumors of wars that are unfolding before us. Our domestic situation can feel thoroughly broken. There is much that causes me to stand aside and wonder what might be next, and to cry, as so many do “Lord, have mercy.” I have asked myself, and have been asked more than once by people near and far what we might make of times such as these, and what a faithful response might look like. It can all seem so hopeless and completely beyond help that it can be hard to know where to turn. And let me be clear: I am equally shaken as the next man. I find myself at a loss for what to say let alone what to do. Yet, having been sitting with these questions, I think these verses actually serve us well here.

You see the issue here is not necessarily currency or what it says or whose head appears on it. That, of itself is neutral. The issue here is the attachment that we hold to the system of power and prestige that the coin represents, or to widen it further, our attachment to the ways and powers we have as citizens of this world and the power it holds in our lives. The point Jesus makes here quite clearly is the same one that the questioners themselves could not understand. That which is here and now is not the same as that which is away from now. God is not bound by Caesar's system, and is not bound by any human system of power and control. God's system is separate and distinct in its character, nature, participation, and reality. Jesus is not concerned about the questions of political mechanisms, taxes or otherwise, because they are not God's System. They are not of God's way.

The same applies to the here and now. We must never forget that impossibilities of the here and now are not the impossibilities of God. Please: hear me: we need to be engaged in the world. We need to care when the bad things happen. We need to seek the best possible ways forward together. We need to seek the peace of the city, of our place and of our world, now and

always. But we cannot forget, as tempting as it may be, that this world, these things, this pain as important and prescient as it is, is not where our ultimate allegiance lies. It is not where our way takes us. As tempting as the cynicisms of the world are to try on, we must always remember that these cloaks are not the tools of the kingdom, nor shall they ever be. Our allegiance relies on the kingdom, first, last and always, and we do well to remember that.

We bleed for the world as we know it. There is much to cause us to weep. We can lose sight of the kingdom coming because it seems so utterly impossible given the circumstances we see before us. And we cannot do that. So I want to offer you a practice of reaching beyond what is to what will be. As daft as it might sound, we must remember that at times like these hope is a practice of resistance. As understandable as the cynical world is, and as tempting as the levers of power as *we* know them might be, we must never forget that this is not all that there is. There is a kingdom that is beyond this time, beyond this place. Hoping in that kingdom is not an exercise in fantasy or a disconnect from the reality that is so often oppressive. It is not a passive delusion to merely allow us to dismiss what is. Instead, it is the way we hold on to the world as it ultimately is, the world that will in time be again. Rather than being the weakness of the few irrationally detached, the hope of what shall be is the sustaining vigor that we require to withstand what now is and what will be. Hope is not the passivity of ambition, but instead is the deep rooted resistance to the cynicism of seeing the world as it is and accepting the proposition that there is nothing ever to be done about it. As we have become more socially engaged in the world around us, we have sometimes forgotten that the systems of this world is not where our resides. It rests somewhere else; it rests in the kingdom to which we all belong, no matter who the shots are being called.

I offer this as a modest prescription at best, knowing well that these days weary us all. But we can always rest in the kingdom that is our home, our promise, our way to which Jesus calls us.

What is God's? We are God's. The world is God's. The kingdom is God's. The future is God's. Our hope is God's. We can never give that to Caesar, nor shall it remain unfulfilled. May this always be our fullest identity. Amen.