

# Sermon: Pentecost XIX: Proper 24

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Year A

Isaiah 45:1-7

Psalm 96:1-9

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

From Psalm 137: *By the rivers of Babylon... there we sat down... and there we wept when we remembered Zion... we hung our harps on the willows... because our captors asked us for songs... and our tormentors asked us for mirth... and said... sing us one of the songs of Zion! ... but how could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land...*

Today's Psalm is all about singing... sing to the Lord a new song... sing to the Lord... all the Earth... sing about God's salvation... glory... strength... and works... but this new song may not actually be new... theologian John Wilkinson writes... from the psalmist's perspective... what is new is also very fundamental... the suggested *new* song is really a song that re-establishes and re-news... it reestablishes the primacy of God's working among all people...

And all people... the earth... and creation itself... are to worship God... that's not a new reality *as such*... but is a call to renew an affirmation to the sovereignty of God... and God's sovereignty trumps that of all earthly rulers...

In today's reading from Isaiah... the prophet lifts up Persian King Cyrus... a potential enemy... actually... but chosen by God... to free the Israelites from Babylonian oppression... to enable them to return to Jerusalem... and rebuild the Temple... and worship God... As a foreign king... Cyrus is one of the last people they would have guessed would come to their aid... but God had other plans...

We hear in our Epistle... how like Cyrus... God has chosen the Thessalonians... because the message of the Gospel came to them... not in word only... but in power... and in the Holy Spirit...

God chooses... unlikely heroes... of every tribe and language and people and nation... it's not either / or... it's not either the Israelites or none of them... it's both / and... but in the Gospel... the Herodians and Pharisees were stuck in either / or thinking... if the Herodians could get Jesus to say that paying taxes was lawful... he'd be in violation of the Law... and if the Pharisees could get him to say that paying taxes was unlawful... the Herodians could accuse him of sedition... but Jesus is more clever than that... as the Son of Man... who is the Incarnate Word... Jesus contains all perspectives... all outcomes... and lets us choose...

The Empire of the world in which we live compels us to pick sides... to be perfect... to know everything... to be self-sufficient... to not ask for help... to magnify our proud achievements... and to minimize our shortcomings and failings... it equates wealth with success and God's favor... and poverty... well... with *not* that...

And Empire's influence... is like water finding its own way... its own *path of least resistance*... seeping past cathedral and church doors... into the patterns of church life... into the practices we employ... we can get caught up just like the Herodians and Pharisees... we can... as we said in our confession just a few minutes ago... treat that which is unfamiliar with suspicion... take that which is simply familiar and make it right... and that which is foreign and make it wrong...

The influence of Kingdom invites us to embrace our humanity... our imperfections... our forgetfulness... Kingdom lets us know that it's OK to try but fail... to make mistakes and learn from them... to make one choice in one situation and a different choice in another... to not know it all... and there's a delicate... fragile veil... I think... between Empire and Kingdom... it has to do with rules and exceptions... vengeance and

forgiveness... fairness and justice... it has to do with more laws on the books than we can count... and the two that Jesus proposed... love God with all your heart... mind... and soul... and love your neighbor as yourself...

So was it lawful to pay taxes or not... this was a volatile question... "ever since the Jewish homeland was added to the Roman Empire in 63 BCE... Rome had required a large annual tribute from the Jewish people... and a part of the harvest... and these taxes reminded them of the Jewish homeland's lack of sovereignty...

In the Jewish homeland in the first century there were two types of coins... because of the Jewish prohibition... one type had no human or animal images on them ... and the other type *had* images... and many Jews would not carry them... but these Jews did... and Jesus points out that there's an image of the Emperor on it...

We know the response that followed... and the distinction Jesus made... has for centuries... contributed to the idea that we just pay taxes... it's also fed our notion about the separation of church and state... and that what happens here... in our worship... doesn't affect the world in which we live...

But Jesus' response is brilliant... when he said: *This is Caesar's coin... give it back to him...* what he was also asking was: *When all is said and done... what really does belong to Caesar...*

In Leviticus God says: *the land is mine... with me... you are but aliens and tenants...* this passage echoes what's written in Genesis about God wanting us to be stewards of the Garden... and not those who exert dominion over the earth... in other words... as we've heard over the last few weeks... the vineyard belongs to God... not to the local collaborators... not to Rome... not even to anyone today... Psalm 24:1 says: *The earth is the Lord's... and the fullness thereof...* so for Jesus and many of his contemporaries... the whole earth... and everything in and on it... belongs to God... so

the answer to his question... is that *nothing belongs to Caesar*... everything belongs to God...

Our currency doesn't have images of Emperors... there are former Presidents... maybe who thought they were emperors... but all of them say *In God We Trust*... but I wonder if it ought to say *In Money We Trust*... because I have to wonder... if as a nation we really do trust God... if we really did... if we really believed that God loves us... how then could we still be dealing with racism... homophobia... sexism... xenophobia... greed... and so on...

We have African neighbors... who are struggling with and dying from ebola... are we ready to do as much for them... as we are for ourselves... are we willing to rally as many resources for them... as we are for ourselves... do we erect ineffective imaginary barriers at our borders to keep out a virus... and then when our people begin to get sick... blame our leaders... what we really need are global systemic changes... in how we treat each other...

There are some... like FaceBook's Mark Zuckerberg... who recently donated \$25M to the CDC to help fight this virus... about a month ago... Bill and Melinda Gates committed \$50M to fight ebola in W. Africa... and some years ago... they gave \$25M to an international group fighting AIDS... yes... these are wealthy people... but they didn't have to make these gifts... they made the same choices we can make to pay things forward... to make a small gift of our treasure where we can... or a gift of our time... or wisdom... or silent witness... or experience... or acceptance... or patience... or teaching... God can use all of us as unlikely Cyruses... it's where we find love of the Other in our hearts...

Author M. Scott Peck wrote that genuine love is volitional... rather than emotional... the person who truly loves... does so because of a *decision* to love... has made a commitment to be loving... whether or not the loving feeling is present... conversely... it

is not only possible but necessary for a loving person to avoid acting on feelings of love... and to a commitment to the physical... emotional... psychological... and spiritual well being of the Other... in spite of how one feels...

And so there's a part of me that bristles inside... when I hear people say how much they love their new sweater or gas grill or car or movie camera or iPhone or any other thing... these are lifeless objects which are incapable of loving us back... they cannot see the best in us when we're temporarily acting our worst... they cannot make sacrifices for our benefit... they are... in fact... like the lifeless coin which the Herodians and Pharisees presented to Jesus...

And in his wisdom... Jesus said... if Caesar wants these lifeless things... let him have them... but give to God what is Gods... and what is God's... the natural order is... this fragile Earth is... we are...

It's taking longer than I'd like... not everyone is singing the Lord's song... not everyone respects the dignity of every human being... or treats them the way they'd like to be treated... in some ways... we have abdicated our responsibility to hold each other accountable... and it's true... given the free will we have... God's power to control the choices we make is small... but... God's power to redeem the choices we make... is always and everywhere... forever and eternally... unlimited... and when necessary... God chooses unlikely heroes... to bring us back to the Temple... so we can sing the Lord's song... Holy God... hasten the day... Amen.