

Sermon: Pentecost 20

The Rev. Mike Wernick

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Year A

Isaiah 45:1-7

Psalm 96:1-9

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

We are reminded in Isaiah... that God can use the unlikeliest of people to do God's work... to express God's desire for God's people... Cyrus was the King of Persia... a potential enemy... the Jewish people... who held on to God's promise that a Messiah who would restore them... must have looked to one of their own... Cyrus must have caught them totally off guard... they must have wondered... why would God choose a potential enemy to help us... but if Pharaoh's daughter can rescue Moses... if Rahab can help the spies as they enter the Promised Land... we have to ask... it makes us wonder... why not someone like Cyrus... after all... Cyrus may have been a Zoroastrian... and Zoroastrianism is monotheistic too... so it makes us wonder... who is my enemy...

The first document written in the New Testament... not the first Gospel... but the earliest document written of the Christian scriptures... is today's Epistle... 1 Thessalonians... Marcus Borg wrote... Paul's letter to a Christian community in Thessalonica... the capital city of Macedonia... a province in northern Greece... was written around the year 50... possibly a year or two earlier... and somewhat surprisingly... given Christianity's origins among Jews in the Jewish homeland... the earliest Christian document is written to a community in Europe... which was largely Gentile... outsiders... people from whom the Jewish people kept separate... people who may have seemed like potential enemies... like Cyrus did...

Yet the nugget I want to lift up in today's Epistle... is Paul's acknowledgement that like Cyrus... the Thessalonians had turned away from idols... images or statues believed to be gods... intending to serve a living and true God... it seems almost certain then... that

the Thessalonians rejected theological agoraphobia... and embraced the boundless God of the Shema... Hear O Israel... the Lord is One...

There's a TV commercial for a home security system... that is... in my opinion... woefully misguided... it seems to start out well... but in its less-than-thirty-second sound-byte... it goes woefully wrong when the man says: *Everything I value most in the world is behind this door*... he doesn't say: *Everyone I value most in the world*... he doesn't talk about protecting the people he loves... but here's how you can protect things... it's one of those word games... that traps us into thinking that things... are more important than people...

Jesus and those who oppose him... the Pharisees and Herodians... are on the cusp of one of their traps... they ask whether it's lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor... or not... if Jesus says it is... the Pharisees... who see the tax as a heretical and anti-nationalist kowtowing to a pagan Emperor... will be incensed... and if he says it's not... the Herodians... who are loyal to Herod... who remains in power at the behest of the Romans... will see refusing to pay the tax as sedition...

In The Christian Century magazine... Debie Thomas writes... *how typical of Jesus... not only to respond to a challenge with an even greater challenge... but to insist that the relationship between faith and politics... is too complex to reduce to platitudes or tweets...*

But Jesus doesn't answer their question *per se*... and his response may mean more than just one thing... it may mean that the Emperor has one domain and God has a different domain... and the two ought not be confused... it may mean that taxes to the Emperor are allowed as long as they don't infringe on God's laws... it may mean that since everything belongs to God... pay nothing to the Emperor... as many commentators believe... but whatever it means... it's not the end of the conversation...

You see... the First Amendment to the Constitution... what we call the separation of Church and State... says... *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances...*

This amendment was enacted only to prevent the government from instituting or regulating religion... but it says nothing about religions' right to comment on the government... so as tempting as it might be to put a "Yes" or a "No" in Jesus' mouth... we still have a lot of contending to do...

Debie Thomas continues... *When I look to Jesus to think about how to practice my faith in the political realm... I see no path to glory that sidesteps humility... surrender... and sacrificial love... I see no permission to secure my prosperity at the expense of another's suffering... no evidence that truth telling is optional... I see no kingdom that favors the contemptuous over the brokenhearted... and no church that thrives for long when it aligns itself with power...*

And theologian John Shea shared a story that reminds me about these qualities... he says there's a story about a man in one boat... who sees another boat coming at him through the fog... he yells at the man in the other boat to steer aside... but the boat continues to come at him... he curses and swears and rages... at the approaching boat... but when the boat is close enough for him to see it clearly... when he can look inside the boat... when he searches for the pilot... he sees that the boat is empty... there is no one in the boat... immediately his anger calms... and he easily steers his boat away avoiding collision...

Answering questions that expect a "Yes" or a "No" answer... like... is the light red?... is it raining?... are there fifty-two people here?... are relatively easy Yes or No questions... but demanding answers about whether it's lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not... is

like raging against that empty boat... it is much easier to fight to be right... than to be empty to be true...

So I ask... how do truth... and emptiness... and our money... converge... how do we use our money... and how do we give back to God... how do we embody the words of 1 Corinthians (29:14)... *For all things come of thee O Lord... and of thine own... have we given thee...*

We seek God's Kingdom... we seek the things that are above while we live in the midst of Empire... and while only the most strident Americans will refuse to pay taxes... we must continue to contend with those who oversimplify... and we must ask ourselves... how do today's graven images... our coins and folding money... distract us from following Jesus... we serve a living God whose image is not on a coin... but those coins can be used in God's service... God's love... grace... and forgiveness... are unmerited... unconditional... and free gifts... but we realize that the ministries... and the administration... and the facilities required to proclaim them are not...

Everything comes to us from God... as gift... God made everything... and everything is God's... we're just borrowing what we have... and when we go we leave it all here... even when it's protected by a home security system... there's nothing here that didn't come to us that way... I may have built a table... but I didn't create the wood... I may have designed a computer program... but the metals in the computer came from star dust... I may have written a great novel... but from where... did my thoughts come... it's all gift...

The Rev. Barbara Crafton wrote... *what's confusing... is that we live in a rich country where you can work and see the gain of your work... in a place where for many of us... wildfires and hurricanes haven't swept it all away... we live in a place where we can go to school... where we can learn to make a living... but no matter how self-made we think we are... it's not true that nobody ever gave us anything... we were empty to start*

with... and the things we have may distract us... but they don't fill us... God has given us everything... and there are millions upon millions of people who have worked even harder than we have... and have none of these things to show for it... there are people who have lost everything... people who never had anything in the first place... and we weren't placed among them... we were placed here... as gift...

God's picture is on the twenty-dollar bill... I just can't see it... must be that new printing process they're using now... God is on my computer screen too... even though all I see is the Apple logo... God's image is on the miles and miles of wheat and corn that grows in the West and could feed the world... God stamps every molecule in every chemical reaction as her own... and my picture isn't on a single one of them... we serve a living God... we give ourselves to God... but God's image is not on a coin... we have been created in God's image... God's image is on us...

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