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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
20th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

Matthew 22:15-22

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

We have all witnessed and experienced the divisions in our society lately. It seems one must choose—left or right, blue or red, conservative or liberal (and that one is found in both politics and the church). It seems there is little room for a middle ground, a stance that considers views from both—or even multiple—perspectives, and helps find a way to address the needs in the world which will make everyone happy, or at least content.

Today our gospel reading brings together the worlds of religion and politics—both of which have it out for Jesus. The Pharisees wanted to arrest Jesus after one of the parables he told against them, but they knew that wouldn't be popular with the people who saw Jesus as a prophet. So, they enlisted the help of the “other side”, the political side, the Herodians—those who supported King Herod, and therefore the Roman government.

The Pharisees were threatened by Jesus' popularity, and had recently questioned his authority to preach and to heal. The Herodians had seen Jesus being treated like a king, which was a threat to the Roman king. So, these two groups, who generally were in opposition to one another, found common ground in their hatred of Jesus and their common mission to get rid of him.

There's nothing like a common enemy to pull people of different affiliations together!

The Pharisees are the ones who question Jesus on a topic they think will trip him up, to offend either the religious side or the political side. Then one or the other would have reason to arrest him. “Is it lawful,” they ask, “to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” To them there seem to be only two answers. One answer will support Jewish law. The other answer will support Roman law.

Instead, Jesus finds a third perspective. After noticing that the coin bares the image of the emperor—Caesar Augustus—he tells them to “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.” Jesus' answer left his accusers “amazed” and, it seems, speechless.

Perhaps we can find a way to be amazed by Jesus' alternative to a polarized world.

Martin Luther expanded on Jesus' simple illustration to teach about the “two kingdoms” in the Christian life. According to Luther, God has established the spiritual kingdom to exist side by side with the kingdom of temporal or worldly authority.

The spiritual kingdom is for those who belong to Christ and live in and under his reign as King. Alongside this spiritual kingdom God has established the temporal kingdom in which human systems are created to keep violence and injustice in check, and to maintain peace and good order. The purpose of our earthly rulers and leaders, including parents and teachers, is to provide protection against the evil forces at work in the world.¹

¹ <https://elca.org/ILE/Articles/931>

That seems to be a risky decision on God's part to give a measure of power and authority to humanity. But Luther is clear that God is an active presence in both the kingdom of heaven and the kingdoms of the world. Whether our leaders know it or not, their role to lead others in the ways of justice and peace is a role given to them by God.

Now it was easy to see Caesar's face on the coin and it makes some sense to "give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's." But what might it mean to give to God the things that belong to God?

Again, Luther helps us with this in his explanation of the first article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism. When we say, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth," Luther first spells out what we are declaring about God. He writes:

I believe that God has created me together with all that exists.

God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties.

In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property; along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life.

God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!

Then Luther tells us what we are to do in response to God's power and presence in our lives.

For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.

When we profess our faith in God—our divine parent and creator of heaven and earth—we are saying that all we have in this world comes as a gift from God. God has created us—body, mind, and soul. We have talents and passions that have led us to seek education and develop skills for our work and all that brings us joy in life.

We may think we have worked hard for what we have and the positions we hold, but we were only able to accomplish them because of the way God put us together and placed us in the settings that provided the teachers and experiences which shape and nurture us throughout our lives.

God creates and God provides. Now, Luther tries to name everything that God provides, which may lead us to wonder—what about those who don't have all those things? Perhaps it was not God who did not provide them, but it was human error and greed that took away from some that which God intends for all to have.

God creates, God provides, and God protects. Again, not all are protected from the danger and evil in the world, and we must ask, was that God's doing, or have the forces of evil and the failures of humanity contributed to the brokenness in the world?

As Caesar's image was imprinted on the Roman coin, the image of God is imprinted on God's children. As we reflect on all of who God is and all God has done for us, we "owe it to

God to thank and praise, serve and obey him.” Or, in Jesus’ words, to give to God the things that are God’s—our gratitude, and even our very lives.

We, the church who belongs to Jesus, are meant to demonstrate God’s way in a divided world. We are meant to live within the human systems God has given us—not to worship any political leader or ideology, but to serve and obey God who is also at work in the midst of those systems.

We are to vote, guided by our Christian calling to love our neighbor. We are to pay taxes so that everyone has the chance to have enough to eat and a safe place to live. We are to be involved in human systems to ensure that we provide rather than compete for resources. We obey the laws of the land, and work to amend those laws in order to bring justice for our neighbors, not only for ourselves.

As we engage in the politics of our country, state, and community in the coming weeks, I invite you to prayerfully consider the choices before you. None of our choices are perfect. No human systems or leaders are. But as we make the most faithful choices we can, may we also remember that our worship is reserved for the One who made us, claims us, and provides us with all we need in this world. May our praise and service to God be reflected in the ways our lives extend God’s love and protection throughout the world.

Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

With confidence in God's grace and mercy, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

A brief silence.

Gracious God, you call us by name and invite us to share your good news. Send your Holy Spirit among preachers, missionaries, and evangelists. We give thanks for the witness of your servant Luke, the evangelist, whom the church commemorates today. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of praise, the heavens and all creation declare your salvation. From the rising of the sun to its setting, may the whole universe show forth your goodness. Bring renewal to place devastated by fire and storm.

Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of all, may your word of justice sound forth in every place. Restore divided nations and communities with reconciling truth. Guide our nation's election process with fairness and good order. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of light, we pray for those living with pain, illness, isolation, grief, anger, or doubt, especially those listed in our bulletin and those we name now in our hearts. *Wait* Join their voices in a new song, assuring them that you call them each by name. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Living God, as you raised Jesus from the dead, so raise up those who have died in you especially Rob Aanenson and...

that at the end you will welcome us all into your presence.

Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Listen as we call on you, O God, and enfold in your loving arms all for whom we pray, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.