

“How Do I Live with Caesar?”

Sermon: Year A Pentecost 19, Proper 24, Lectionary 29

Texts: Matthew 22:15–22, Isaiah 45:1–7

Preached: October 22, 2017 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

Are any of you as sick of our political situation as I am? My finger can't scroll through my newsfeed fast enough for my eyes to avoid the latest strife. My thumb can't move fast enough to the mute button when I watch TV. And even without the sound, there are those stark, scary images floating across the screen that would lead you to believe that this candidate is a thief who has been in office 100 years who delights in releasing murderers and rapists from prison, and that candidate gleefully stands on the air hoses of little old ladies in nursing homes in order to make a buck, that this politician singlehandedly increased taxes \$19 trillion ... well, you get the picture. And then there are the daily Twitter wars. It seems as though every day is a string of insults and “gotchas.” Our politics are based on tearing people down. It just makes you want to throw up your hands in disgust and walk away from the whole mess. And sadly, that is what more and more people are doing.

People have come to despise government and all it stands for. No matter which end of the political spectrum you may find yourself on, or whether you consider yourself apolitical, government is seen as the enemy, and increasingly, nobody wants anything to do with any of it. We resent the taxes we pay, we resent the ways those taxes are or are not being used, we resent those who benefit from government programs, we resent that government money is not being spent on the things we want. Here's how weird it's getting: One young man I know, in his 30s, a Ted Nugent conservative who rails against welfare queens and Obamacare and cheers when people bring loaded AK-47s into grocery stores, who regularly called for the execution of the previous President for treason, and who says that government has no reason to be involved in our lives, nonetheless is only able to get by because he receives a monthly disability check, goes to the doctor paid by Medicaid, and shops for groceries with his SNAP card—all provided by government. That's how weird this is. We shake our heads and ask ourselves, “How should we as Christian people respond to government?”

Well, if it's any comfort—and it probably isn't—this weirdness and confusion about how we should view government and its powers is nothing new. Look for a moment at the reading from the Hebrew scriptures in your bulletin. Without context, this passage makes little sense to us. But see that name Cyrus there in the first line? That refers to Cyrus the Great, powerful ruler of the Persian Empire. The prophet Isaiah is speaking to the Jewish people who are living in captivity and exile under the government of the Babylonian Empire. And he tells them that God is going to use Cyrus, King of the Persians, to overthrow Babylon and to get God's people back to their homeland, to reestablish their nation. Cyrus, this pagan emperor who worships the god Marduk, and doesn't even know the name of Israel's God, is nonetheless going to be used by that God to bring about justice. In fact, he's called God's Anointed One—God's Messiah. It seems that God can find ways to work through governments, even bad ones, even ones that do not recognize God at work.

And then we have the gospel story. You know, it's often said that there are three things you should not discuss in polite company: money, politics, and religion. Well, that pesky Jesus manages to talk about all three. Context: He has just entered Jerusalem to the acclaim of the people... Palm Sunday for us. And his enthusiastic reception has upset some very powerful folks. The temple authorities are worried he's going to stir up the people against them and cause trouble that will cause the Romans to come crashing down on everyone's head. And those Herodians? Those are the political cronies of King Herod, the corrupt puppet king the Romans have installed because he will cooperate with them... in other words, these are collaborators with the occupation.

And so they bring up the biggest hot-button political issue of the day: taxes. The people of Roman Palestine were taxed out the wazoo. And there was one particular tax that was especially hated: the imperial tax, a silver denarius per person, paid in tribute to Rome to support—wait for it—yes, to support the Roman occupation. They had to pay a tax to support their own oppression. On top of it, the coin that was used for this tax bore on the front the graven image of Caesar with an inscription that declared him to be the Son of God, and on the other side an image of a weeping, bowed woman who represented captive Judea—a triple slap in the face of observant Jews, because it broke the first two commandments and reminded them of their humiliation. So Jesus is asked, as a trap, to declare whether it is lawful to pay that tax. He asks for a coin to be held up, and he tells them to give to Caesar that which belongs to Caesar, and to give to God that which belongs to God, which we know to be everything in creation. See, Jesus knows that we stand with one foot in the kingdom of this world and its systems and values, and with the other we stand in the kingdom of God with its values.

From the beginning, Christians have struggled with the question of how to respond to earthly government. Here's how Paul addresses this in Romans 13, writing to people who are being actively persecuted, even killed, by their government: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. [...] Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." OK, that's what any citizen should do, live in respectful relationship with government. But here's what Paul says should make followers of Jesus distinctive: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

We cannot *not* be involved in this world, with all its corruption, with all its skewed values that oppress the poor and those on the margins...but because we are citizens of the kingdom of God, we are simultaneously and as a matter of priority called to operate within the kingdoms of this world from our *highest* allegiance, which is to God's kingdom values of mercy, and peace, and justice, and lifting up the lowly, feeding and clothing the widow and the orphan, nursing the sick, giving water to the thirsty and a home to the homeless... all of this out of love for the neighbor. Those are the values we are called to lift up, both with our voices and with our actions. And when government works against those values, we are to speak up respectfully and work even harder to live lives consistent with those values. Remember, those early Christians did not sit silent. They resisted the dark forces in their government, but they did so in ways consistent with kingdom values, even when that led to their martyrdom. They witnessed to the higher rule of God through acts of love and self-giving.

Now there are those who would argue that government has no legitimate role to play in bringing about those kingdom values. "Keep your hands out of our pockets! Let the churches take care of these things, since that's what people of faith are called to do!" But let's look at that realistically. Fairly recent studies estimate that there are some 350,000 individual congregations in the U.S. The median congregation has about 75 participants on a Sunday morning. Let's look at the cost of the SNAP program, which provides food assistance. The cost in 2016 was \$71 billion—down from \$80 billion just three years earlier. If it depended only on the churches, that would be a price tag of \$203,000 from each congregation to serve those same folks. That's almost our entire budget. Then if we add in care for the sick, looking just at Medicaid, the cost in 2013 was \$574 billion. That's an additional \$1.64 million per congregation. Do you see the problem with that argument? The churches cannot possibly do this alone. God's resources are distributed in many other hands.

Is there waste and fraud and corruption in these systems? Absolutely. That is the reality of the kingdom of this world. Until God's good kingdom is fully realized among us, there will *always* be imperfect systems. But the Good News we hear today is that God can use even the imperfect, corrupt, oppressive systems of this world to bring about redemption of a broken creation and to lift up what God values. And that is where we as Christian people, as Christian citizens, are called to be as shrewd as the children of this world in participating in the systems of this world, lifting up our voices in advocacy for those who have no voice, and laboring to ensure that God's purposes and God's values can be worked out even through the corrupt and broken systems of worldly governments. But we must always do so in ways that speak to kingdom values of love and respect. And where government will not do those things that support the least of these, we as Christians must.

This isn't about politics, and I will say that as adamantly as I can. This is not about politics. It is about how we learn to live out kingdom values in a world that does not value the same things. It's about doing those things that we, as citizens both of this world and of God's Good Reign, are called to do, as we seek to keep the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. It's about finding new ways to care for our neighbors, with or without the help of government, and about living out the Good News in our world in ways that honor and respect and lift up, rather than tear one another down, as we see the world do. It's about opening ourselves up to be part of God's creative solutions, agents of God's in-breaking kingdom. And it's about trusting the Spirit who dwells in us to teach us to carry out the tricky balancing act required to live with one foot in the kingdom of this world, and one foot in the kingdom of God. Thanks be to God. AMEN