



Message for the Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost  
October 18, 2020

*“Divided Loyalties, where do we stand?”*

Pastor Kerns

*“Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength”  
(Psalm 96:7)*

Let us pray: Ever-living God, the heavens were glad and the earth rejoiced when you sent your Son, the incarnate Word, to dwell with us. Help us to proclaim your glory to those who do not know you, until the whole earth sings a new song to you, with your Son and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen.

“Whose head is this, and whose title?” The response was, “The emperor’s.” There was a title to an article that I read this past week that made me ask myself some tough questions. The title was, “Divided Loyalties, Weighing it out.” So whose head was on the coin that Jesus asked his detractors to produce? Whose head is on the coins in my pocket right now? Does that challenge me to engage in what that means for me or for all of us? Jesus responds to the questions about the taxes with asking for a coin and then having those questioning him to identify that it is the emperor on the coin. Then we have the

age old question, I guess at least for me, what then does belong to the emperor and what does belong to God?

As this was rattling around in my head, I found myself wondering about the passages today that point to being chosen. In Paul's letter to the Thessalonians we read, "For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you." Why, Paul continues, "Because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction." Being chosen implies a special relationship with God, like Israel. Then we go to the first reading from the Prophet Isaiah and we have God commissioning Cyrus as God's anointed. He is the one God has chosen but he is not an Israelite. He is the only non-Israelite designated in the Old Testament as God's chosen which is normally reserved for Israel's kings or high priests.

Then I turn to the gospel for today and we have Jesus challenging those sent to trap him and in turn us to choose between what belongs to the emperor and what belongs to God. For me this time reading thorough our gospel, I had to stop and ask about the parties who were sent to Jesus to entrap him. I noticed that the Pharisees who wanted to entrap Jesus sent their disciples to Jesus along with the Herodians. The Pharisees didn't go themselves but chose others to do their dirty work. Maybe it's because up to this time in our gospel lessons over the past few weeks we had Jesus using parables to make his point against them. They were not happy that Jesus was referring to them over the course of time before today's gospel.

Talk about divided loyalties when we have the disciples of the Pharisees that would mean they represent the Pharisees and the Herodians who didn't get along with each other. Their common ground seems to be they didn't like Jesus. The Pharisees resisted the Roman occupation while the Herodians, who were supporters of Herod who was in power at this time, supported it but both used the occupation to support them financially and politically. Their only common goal was they disliked Jesus who was the thorn in their sides.

Divided loyalties, so what belongs to the emperor and what belongs to God. It's a tough question for us to consider in an atmosphere of distrust and even hate for the other side of the political spectrum today. There is so much wear it on your sleeves attitude where if you disagree with me then you are no good. Tough questions are being asked but the answers are not as cutting as Jesus question to those who came to him. Do you notice how the questions are not really answered and are deflected to someone else as it becomes their issue and not the one being questioned? There is so much time and money being spent to see who is going to be the next emperor or should I say president and there has been so much distrust orchestrated we have to ask ourselves what is going on?

Jesus asks the simple question about who is on the coin but the bottom line was that the census taxes were demanded by the Romans and despised by the Jews. The trap that was set up was to force Jesus to make a statement that was either treasonous to

Rome or offensive to the Jews. They were trying to force Jesus to make a choice and he outwitted them and the Pharisees who sent them. When they heard what Jesus said, we are told, “They were amazed; and they left him and went away.”

Faced with this trap question, Jesus didn’t do what our politicians do today, which is to answer a different question and not the one posed to them. So reach into your pocket and take out a coin, Jesus answered, and now show it to me. Whose face do you see and whose inscription? They did so. The coin they showed him was a denarius—a coin that had been issued by Emperor Tiberius and that was used for paying taxes.

On the heads side of the coin was a portrait of Tiberius along with the inscription, “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus” as in, “King Tiberius, son of God.” On the tails side of the coin was the image of a woman depicting peace with the words “high priest”—referring to the emperor as the high priest of the empire. So right there in their very pockets—in the shadow of God’s Temple in Jerusalem, where they were to worship God in truth and spirit—they had a coin with a graven image and inscription of an authority claiming to be the son of God and claiming to be the high priest. Right there in their own hands they bore a graven image of a false god with the statement of faith that ran counter to the faith of Israel.

So Jesus simply said, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and give to God the things that are God’s.” At my pastor’s Bible study this past week; one of my colleagues shared something she had read about our gospel for today that in the

Greek the word **back** is inserted before the give to. It would read, "Give therefore **back** to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's." I found that point interesting in that the coin belonged to the emperor so give it back to him but give to God the things that are God's.

What are God's things? Think about the coins in your possession and whose head is on the coin and whose title is on the coin? I don't know about all of you but I am tired of the political stuff. I've had it up to the top of my head but it is still 16 days away to Election Day from this Sunday. The unbelievable infighting and the intentional division that has become part of the story is very troubling. Over time our coins have been designed with different people on the coins and in their lives I wonder what the divisions were for them. There are so many coins being pumped into the political races it is astounding to say the least.

If the coins are meant to be used as currency in our everyday lives for us to have some sort of normal abilities to use those coins for our needs, how have they been used in the political realm? Maybe it's time to give them all back to the emperor but all that would do is produce more division and attacks on the opponents. The reality on our currency today we will find the faces of "emperors" whose roles were not what we consider as acceptable today. So what do we do with our coins and bills for that matter? We are trapped in a fallen, sinful world. Are we to flee the world and separate or cloister

ourselves? That may be one option. Are we to try to burn the system down and revolt against the empire? That is another option.

According to Rolf Jacobson professor at Luther Seminary, “It seems to me that Jesus’ words: “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and give to God the things that are God’s,” at once free us to live **with** the emperor but to live **for** God.” Jacobson goes on, “The kingdoms of this earth all around us and trap us in their sickening realities. But the kingdom of God—which is not of this world—is even now breaking into this world and freeing us to live lives of faith in God and love of God and neighbor.”

We are a divided nation right now, at least it appears that way, and it’s all over the upcoming election. Who is it that we are to listen to? What is the reality of their stand on the issues before us? It surely appears, at least to me, that the emperors of this world are in any way considering giving to God the things that are Gods. Yes we have to live **with** the emperor but we need to continue to live **for** God. There are so many people hurting in our world right now and in our country and the challenge is for us to remember them and in doing so we are living for God.

As Paul says in our second reading, we have been chosen by God. Cyrus in the first reading was chosen by God. In our gospel reading Jesus offers a choice in who we serve. The disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians were chosen by the Pharisees to go and trap Jesus. How do we really live out our lives by living **with** the emperor but live **for** God? Remember, God will always be with you and I am sure that the emperors of this

world will not always stand with you. I pray that God's grace and love touches each one of you so that you can distinguish what is God's. I know I am jumping to another gospel reading but for me it stands out today. Giving to God for me means, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." Amen.

Let us pray: O Lord, we have many choices in front of us in this life. Guide us in your ways and help us to always remember what is yours. Amen.