

# 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost Reflection

Pr. Nicole Hanson-Lynn October 17-18, 2020

Isaiah 45:1-7

Psalm 96:1-13

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and the giver and sustainer of our faith, the Holy Spirit.

The Pharisees went out and plotted to entrap Jesus. We know a little something about trying to entrap our opponents at this time in our civic lives. We see debates that made up of both political parties trying to trap the other. We see our friends and neighbors engage in “trap” questions for the “other side.” The “rhetorical” questions of how could *they* think such awful and unchristian thoughts?

Specifically, the trap that the Pharisees and the Herodians have laid for Jesus is political. It's interesting that these two groups have teamed up. We know that the Pharisees have a fairly strict understanding of Jewish law, including a dislike of political figures from outside their Jewish tradition. And while we don't know much about the Herodians, their name suggests that they have a much more positive association with the Roman government and their puppet king, Herod. If these two groups are willing to work together against you, you know that you're in a tight spot. And they ask together, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. If Jesus says, “yes, paying taxes to the government is legal,” the Pharisees will claim he is anti-Jewish, a supporter of the oppressive government. They can argue that Jesus follows Caesar's law, not God's. If Jesus says, “no, paying taxes to this government is not legal,” the Herodians can claim that Jesus is endangering them all by protesting Rome. And, by the time that the gospel of Matthew was written down, the claim that protesting Rome was deadly would prove true, as Rome had violently suppressed the rebellion in Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and dispersed the Jews again. Whether Jesus answers “yes” or “no,” he's answered incorrectly for one of these groups of people.

But Jesus refuses to play the game set before him. He doesn't answer their question, but asks them his own. He amazes both the Pharisees and the Herodians when he avoids the trap and challenges them to a much more difficult way of being in the world. A way that neither group expected.

At this time of year, as we prepare for our elections, I often feel like I have trap questions thrown to me as well. And we see choices put before us that are no choices at all. Who will save us and this country? The Republicans or the Democrats?

It's a trick question, of course. Because salvation does not belong to a political party. Salvation does not belong to Caesar. Salvation belongs to God. Any claims that anything else will save us is a temptation to idolatry. But Jesus does not advocate a faith that is an escapism from reality or from our communal life. The life of Jesus is engaged with the most vulnerable in society, with the outsiders. And Jesus does not tell us to disengage with our communities. Escapism can become an idol just as easily as money or political party.

I think that Paul's letter to the Thessalonians has wisdom for us. He opens his letter, "We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." In a political climate that wants so badly to divide us, we have been given the assurance of a God who loves us. The assurance of a God who has already died for us. The assurance of a God who has already conquered death. Instead of engaging in the sort of divisive and mudslinging attacks that we see so often, we are free to pray for those who differ from us. And not just to pray that they would change, but to begin by offering thanks for them. Thanking God for this person. Recentering ourselves in Christ before we engage in our civic duties and civic discourse. Centering our public life in our faith life. Trusting that God truly is the Lord of all.

### **Announcements**

Thank you to everyone continuing their financial support. Your stewardship and discipleship are faithful witnesses in this time.

We still are offering Bible studies with video conferencing and phone options. If you are interested in joining, please call either Salem (906) 932-1510 or Zion (906) 932-1320.

We will be making a Salem and Zion Advent devotional, with a reflection each day from members of the congregation. If you are interested in more information about how you can participate in writing a reflection or if you are interested in receiving the completed devotional, call our offices or contact Pr. Nicole with any questions!

Peace be with you.