

Today we continue in the last of our summer sermon series entitled, "The Problem of Christian Nationalism." A quick review from last week: two quick definitions, though there are many. 1. Christian Nationalism is "an ideology or position that privileges the presence, role, and voice of Christians over non-Christians in this country" (Rev. Jenny McDevitt). I also like scholar and preacher N.T. Wright's definition. "Christian Nationalism is impoverished as it seeks a kingdom without a cross. It pursues a victory without mercy. It acclaims God's love of power rather than the power of God's love." Some Christians would like for America to be or believe that it is a Christian nation, but it is not. Religious freedom is what America is supposed to be about and that also includes freedom from religion, hence why separation of church and state is of utmost importance. Enforcing a national religion spits in the very face of the freedom this country was built on. One of our founding fathers, James Madison, said, "The separation of church and state is to keep forever from these shores the ceaseless strife that has soaked the soil of Europe with blood for centuries." His words are a reminder of one of the reasons why 13 colonies separated themselves from Britain (also unfair taxes and lack of self-government) and why America should not be a theocracy or it will become the very thing it sought to separate itself from in the beginning. As I said last week, history repeatedly demonstrates how easily governments can wrap themselves in Christian language while moving in profoundly unchristian directions. George Orwell, a known atheist and author of *Animal Farm* and *1984*, differentiated patriotism from nationalism. He said, "Patriotism is of its nature defensive, both militarily and culturally. Nationalism, on the

other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power.” *There’s* a big difference between loving one’s country and worshiping it. Christian nationalism is essentially worshiping your country, which is idolatrous, while pretending to be doing it under the guise of Christianity. Christian nationalism isn’t new. It has been going on since Constantine in the 3rd century. And idolatry? Well, that’s been a sin and a temptation since the creation of humanity. With that in mind, let’s turn to the text for today. In chapters 21 & 22 of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is in Jerusalem, making his way to the cross and is just a few days away from his arrest. He has had a triumphal entry on a donkey, turned over tables in the Temple, told more parables, and risks teaching in the Temple, as he awaits his arrest. Jesus is not only teaching people who want to learn; in the audience are some who want to trip him up with catch-22-type questions, and others who try to goad him into saying something controversial” (A.J. Levine, *Entering The Passion of Jesus*). Jesus’ authority continues to be questioned. Today’s text involves the first of three tests given to Jesus by some Pharisees and some supporters of Herod, called Herodians. Jerusalem is in Israel, which is a Roman occupied territory. “The Romans let the Jews have their temple worship, but they are taxed unfairly to support the Roman capital, and they enjoy a few rights, because they are not truly Roman citizens” (*A Lectionary Sermon Series*, Vol. 1, Brian Erickson). If you think you don’t like paying taxes, meet the residents of Jerusalem during Jesus’ time. There were several taxes but the ones mentioned in today’s text are poll taxes, which were based on the census and paid annually with one Roman coin, a denarion, which was a day’s wage. This poll tax and other taxes

were often unfair and especially put a heavy burden on the poor. Now the Pharisees and the Herodians did not see eye to eye on anything politically. Nonetheless, what brings this unlikely partnership together is their one commonality: getting rid of Jesus. So they plan the perfect question regarding taxation to trap him. They send their intern disciples to do their dirty bidding. If Jesus answers **yes**, then the Romans will snatch Jesus up for being an instigator or for breaking the law. However, if Jesus answers **no**, then he risks alienating the oppressed Jews, many of whom were his followers, and the religious zealots in the crowd may just stone him for going against God's Word. It's a lose-lose situation for Jesus. So they all assume. Before turning to God's Word for us this day, let us **PRAY. READ.**

These unlikely opposing groups come together and offer fake compliments of Jesus before they pose their trick question. It's as if they say, "Bless your heart, Jesus" all while smiling and speaking their fake niceties. Imagine this conversation as a cartoon with the unspoken thoughts of the Pharisees and Herodians in a bubble. "Teacher we know that you are genuine (To be honest we think you are full of it), and that you teach God's way as it really is (though we might not believe it to be true), and that you aren't swayed by people's opinions (by the way, why don't you defer more readily to our authority?); for you show no favoritism (of course, everyone knows some people are inherently better than others)" (*The Christian Century*, Audrey West). The inauthenticity of this group of Pharisees and Herodians is palpable, and Jesus calls their bluff and sees through their sarcasm to their evil

motives. Yet, ironically, “each line of this insincere speech speaks truth about Jesus: He is true, he teaches the way of God, and he shows favoritism to no one, unlike the ‘hypocrites’ who pretend to praise him” (*FWO*, Susan Grove Eastman). Jesus asks them, “Why do you test me, you hypocrites?,” but it’s a rhetorical question, as Jesus and those gathered there already know the answer. Then Jesus requests to see the Roman coin used to pay this tax. This is a loaded and trapped request, as the Pharisees, who followed the religious law, weren’t supposed to have any Roman coins on them due to issues of idolatry. Surely they were embarrassed, though we aren’t told. Jesus asks for this particular coin because it has the image of Caesar on the front with the inscription, “Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus” and on the back were Latin words meaning “high priest” (*Levine*). Again, Jesus knows what is happening here and with the coin present, he asks, “Whose image and inscription is this?” (v. 20). Of course they reply, “Caesar’s.” Talk about a back fire on “Stump the Teacher?” There’s no comeback.

“The denarius is Roman propaganda: it says that Caesar is divine, that Caesar has power, that Caesar has, and is, money. Power, divinity, and empire- they are all minted from the same mold. Jesus seeks a different mint, a different mold” (*Levine*). So then Jesus replies, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God” (v. 21). With this answer, they can’t really accuse Jesus of not following the Roman law. And they surely can’t say that Jesus is going against God’s Word. I wonder here if Matthew was reverting back to chapter 6 and saying, “Everybody has to decide between Caesar and God. No one can serve

two masters” (v. 24)? Did you notice though that Jesus didn’t REALLY answer the question? Instead, he poses a question of his own, asking his questioners to decide what they think belongs to God and what they think belongs to Caesar. In other words, “Live **with** the emperor but live **for** God” (workingpreacher.org, Rolf Jacobson). While paying taxes to Rome was an obligation, giving to God was and is because of a calling and commitment to promote the alternative kingdom. The text tells us that after hearing Jesus’ response, they left astonished. Maybe they heard the Psalmist words echoing in their minds and hearts as they departed? “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it” (24:1). Or maybe they knew that they had nothing on Jesus?! That is, until, as we see in Luke’s Gospel, false accusations are made saying that Jesus “perverted Rome when he forbid people from paying taxes” (23:2). Now...people do lie. “Words can be twisted, and teaching, as well as any political statement, comes with risk” (Levine).

It’s also important to note what Jesus **doesn’t** say here. “He doesn’t say that there are two distinct realms, the religious and the secular, and that they require our equal fidelity. What he says is far more subtle and complicated: the coin is already Caesar’s- there’s his face and name stamped right on it- so give it to him. But then consider the much harder questions: “Whose image do you bear?” “What belongs to God? What kind of tribute do we owe to God” (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net)? No wonder they walked away! That’s a lot to process. Another way of asking that question is, “To whom do we belong?” Sometimes it seems like we belong to Caesar. Taxes, legal

restrictions on our freedoms, imprisonment if you engage in civil disobedience but rest assured, we don't belong to Ceasar! All the more reason why, we need for our faith to influence our politics and not our politics to influence our faith. That is the danger at the heart of Christian nationalism, as evidenced a few Sundays ago in Indiana. Lt. Gov. Micah Beckwith, who is a pastor as well, preached a sermon at First Baptist Church [Elkhart](#). His message? "How to Hate Properly." But the statement that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up? He said, "I'm gonna pray in my authority as Lieutenant Governor of the state of Indiana because God's given me that authority." Now a private citizen can believe God handed them authority. A pastor can preach their theology. But when a sitting Lieutenant Governor calls their government office a gift of divine Christian authority, we need to talk very seriously about Christian nationalism, hence this sermon series.

Scripture has a funny way of cutting any of us, especially those in power, down to size, doesn't it? In whose image are we made? In whose image are we to emulate and follow? It's hard to ignore the connection from the opening of God's words in Genesis (1:26) that we are created by God and bear God's image. As Christ's disciples we're called to be a different kind of people whose lives bear witness to Jesus in ways that the world finds astonishing, perplexing, and unrecognizable. We're created and claimed by God; therefore, how we treat one another matters to God. Where we spend our allegiance matters to God. When I look at 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

(Thomas). “When we look at each other, or in the mirror, we tend to see the inscriptions that our business with the world has left on us: you are what you look like, what you have, what you wear, what you do, the company you keep, your addiction” (*FOW*, Richard E. Spalding).

Nevertheless, underneath all those inscriptions is a much deeper mark: God’s image of love, forgiveness, peace, generosity, etc. stamped on us in a permanent way- along with the words “Child of God.” Just like the Pharisees who are stuck in a world that violates the ten commandments, we’re as well.

I came across some writings of a woman who calls herself a former Christian nationalist. She writes, “I was naïve. I thought integrity at the top would shape everything under it. But I watched something else happen. I watched the faith I loved become useful to power. I watched mercy get mocked as weakness. I watched cruelty get renamed courage. I watched people defend things they would have condemned if the other side had done them. Jesus told us to look at the fruit and what I see is disturbing. And eventually I had to ask a question I did not want to ask. If the tree keeps producing contempt, fear, dominance, scapegoating, and dehumanization, how long do we keep calling it righteous because someone taped a Bible verse to the trunk” (julietrue@substack.com)? Friends, “figuring out our taxes is the easy part. What’s much harder is living out our political convictions with a Christlike humility, with a compassion that embraces our political others as siblings. But if we really belong to God, if we really are fashioned in God’s image, then we need to practice our faith and our politics in a way that reflect who God

in Christ is. It's not a question of backing down or being dishonest or watering down our beliefs. It's a question of remembering that the God whose image we bear is a God of endless and sacrificial love and grace upon grace. So, in short, give God everything" (Thomas)! "May no ruler- ever reaching- try to take the place of you, God. May we, living in your image, seek your kingdom that endures" (Carolun W. Gilette, hymn: *Is It Lawful To Pay Taxes?*). May we choose this day whom we will serve. Amen.