

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

When most of us older folks were growing up, I can think of at least three topics that were verboten to talk about. Is there anyone who would like to hazard a guess what three topics **I** am thinking of? Finances, politics, and religion were the three in my brain. I would first like to point out that all three of these topics are pretty much front and center out there on a daily basis today, over and over. Would you agree with my opening statement on these three topics and my analysis of the current trend?

The second thing I want to point out is that all three of these topics are alluded to or actually touched on in both our first reading and our gospel reading. I should also point out that our gospel reading is **not** a parable but rather a story about a test which I will talk more about later.

Notice in our reading from Isaiah that God is enabling and using Cyrus, who does not even **know** God to set God's people free from their current captive exile and then to bring them home once again. For me, this is most likely an Old Testament reminder of or statement similar to the line of Paul's claim in verse 1 of Romans 13 where he says: "**Everyone must submit to the governing authorities. For no authority exists except by God, and the authorities that do exist have been established by God.**"

Romans 13 is an interesting read with seven verses about governments and three verses about loving others and finally ending with four verses about the approaching end of the world. Sometimes I think Christians have missed the New Testament message on our relationships to our governments and leaders, as well as to others. There are many individuals, groups of people, and even countries that have been harmed or yes even destroyed in the name of the church and God. Why do **we** do this? Is it a result of a focus on law rather than a focus on grace?

In our gospel reading today the first thing I want you to notice is that it says the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus by sending their disciples **along with** the Herodians to ask a question of Jesus. If you do not know - then it is important for you to know that **politically** speaking the only thing the Pharisees and Herodians ever had in common was their **dislike** of Jesus. So they held their noses, put aside their many differences for a moment, and came together to pose a question to Jesus that they hoped would put Jesus between a rock and hard place. From this reading it does not appear that they were successful.

Notice the subtleties hidden deep in this story. They are posing a question of law, yet the law also says not to have any graven images. The Roman coin had multiple graven images. This is probably why Jesus did not carry coins. The hypocritical Pharisees also should not be carrying these coins yet they were able to immediately produce one when asked to do so by Jesus. In fact, we could say that those who wanted to trap Jesus with a question of law were actually trapped themselves, because not only did the Pharisees have a coin readily available but they **even** had it in the sacred spaces of the **temple**. Funny how that worked out.

Governments **are** necessary. And taxes are necessary too. And yes – every country has a Caesar with which to contend. But do we belong to that country, or even that Caesar? Now this **may** be a simple question of semantics because yes we often say we do belong to a certain country or state but do we really mean we belong to it or are we really saying we are a **part** of that country or state or family, and so on. The most important question then is to **whom** do we belong? And the simple answer is that we belong to God, to our Creator.

I think this is the crux of what Jesus is saying in verse 21 where Jesus says: “**Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.**” First and foremost, we belong to God because we were created by God and made by God in God’s own image. We are also made worthy of God’s redemption by God’s own acts of grace and mercy through Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.

Are you aware the consequences of belonging to God **are remarkable**. It means first that God will not forsake us. This is in contrast to the Pharisees and other world leaders, then and now, who were and are notoriously bad about caring for the people. It means secondly that because we belong to God, we also belong to the people of God, the body of Christ. We are baptized into this fellowship. And finally, it means that we give to God that which already belongs to God, **ourselves**. We take the sacred trust and invest it in lives of service and worship.

Hear then the good news:

Jesus’ words in this story today are famous for their ambiguity.

This ambiguity is, however, more than a clever maneuver to evade entrapment.

It admits the moral ambiguity that permeates our political and social existence.

We **cannot** avoid any and all obligations that may dishonor or grieve a merciful God.

The needs of the world demand that Christians stay deeply engaged in it.

Jesus said that we are **in** the world but not **of** the world. I know this is very difficult to understand and process.

Jesus' statement regularly calls us to repentance, to change how we live, and constantly reexamine our often divided loyalties.

Jesus' statement **extends** the promise that we need not be totally defined by the societal games we must play.

Martin Luther identifies this idea in his phrase we are both saint and sinner.

It is said in the New Testament that Abraham's faith was counted as righteousness.

But Jesus is **our** righteousness.

God in Christ loves and values you more than you know.

It is in the thick of life and citizenship that we should lift high the cross and proclaim the love of God for all people.

Richard Rohr says: "Every time God forgives us, God is saying that God's own rules do not matter as much as the relationship that God wants to create with us."

Finally, it is in these words from our baptisms that we need to have faith in and remember daily: "Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."

Grace and peace to you, my friends. You are a child of God.

Amen