

Exodus 33:12-23

Psalm 99

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

Every four years in this country, we have a national election when our citizens have an opportunity to vote for the candidates and policies that they think are the best for our nation. We are in the midst of one of those seasons now...the election season. In just 16 days, at midnight on November 3, the voting will be completed, but the results may not be known for days or even weeks. Unless you've had both your television set and your radio turned off and your computer and your cell phone have been silenced, I'm sure you've heard a few things about this election. And I expect you have some idea of your own preferences. We've all heard it said that politics should not be addressed from the pulpit, but I beg to disagree. Perhaps before I go any farther, I should qualify some terminology. The term 'politics' covers all the activities between and among human beings that determine how they interact...how they treat one another, what the rules will be, how power is distributed...and how they organize themselves into communities. If you look at the life and ministry of Jesus Christ you will see that he *always* dealt with both politics and the nature of God. Preachers not only can't stay away from politics; preachers, if they are going to preach the good news of Jesus Christ at all, are obligated to preach politics. That's the whole message of the Gospel. What preachers must avoid at all cost is partisan politics...promoting a particular political party or candidate. Telling people they *should* vote is mandatory. Telling them *how* to vote is forbidden...both morally and legally. Our own Founding Fathers were very careful to delineate the separation of both church and state. There are many religious citizens among us from a variety of different religions. While our country's foundation is built on Judeo-Christian ethics, there is no national religion in the United States.

Our gospel lesson this morning plunks us right down in the middle of a tricky question for Jesus about religion and politics. He has recently arrived in Jerusalem with his disciples and has attracted throngs of others. He has overturned the tables of the money changers in the Temple out of sheer outrage that they would desecrate his father's house. He's preaching God's love to all who will listen and most of them are the average citizens of Jerusalem living with the Roman knee on their necks. They hang on Jesus' every word. They are hungry for a balm for their souls and Jesus is providing that in his words and his actions. Even some of the religious leaders of the day are listening to Jesus and find him a powerful and convincing teacher and healer. He

has power...power that comes from within...power to attract people...power to motivate people...power to influence people and power to heal people. Those with institutional power find him to be a threat. He has more sway over the people than they do and they are desperate to figure out how to discredit him and do away with him if they can.

In a rather swarmy, self-serving way these religious leaders engage Jesus in conversation by flattering him in the most shallow and self-serving ways. Jesus is polite and listens to them, but he isn't fooled. He knows they are up to something. Actually they are trying to maneuver him into saying something that will incriminate him with the powers that be...Rome and the Temple hierarchy. It's a strange alliance that has approached him...a group of temple authorities and those who are politically aligned with King Herod, the puppet king put in power by the occupying Romans. These two political forces are natural enemies, but in this situation they have a common objective: they both want to discredit and get rid of Jesus, but theirs is an uneasy alliance. This is not the first time the prevailing powers have tried to entrap Jesus. When Jesus cleared the temple of the money changers and began teaching in the temple, he was confronted by the temple leaders who wanted to know by what authority he was doing those things. Jesus turned the tables on them by asking a question in reply...a question that they couldn't answer: Was John the Baptist's baptism from God or from human origin? The temple leadership ducked that question by simply saying, "We don't know."

But they think they have Jesus trapped now. They want to know from Jesus if it is lawful for Jews to pay taxes to the Roman emperor. The Jews hate the occupying Romans for many reasons, not the least of which is that they are taxed so heavily by the Romans that they can barely survive. As Americans we can appreciate their feelings about taxes. We aren't too crazy about them either. And it won't take much coaxing for us to remember that our country was founded on a revolution that centered around unfair and crippling taxes from a distant and oppressive king. We can relate to the Jews of first century Palestine. Even the Roman currency itself is hated by the Jews. The coin of the realm used to pay the tax is imprinted with the image of "the divine Caesar." To the Jews and to the temple hierarchy of Pharisees and Priests and Scribes, this coin was a violation of the first two of the Ten Commandments given to them by God about not worshipping idols or making any images of God. Not only was the tax itself offensive; the money used to pay it was offensive in its disrespect for God as well.

So here's Jesus' dilemma and why his questioners thought they had him. If Jesus says, "Yes. The Jews should pay the Roman tax."...he will offend both the Jews who are following him devoutly and who also hate the Romans and the tax and the Temple authorities as well who find the coin itself to be offensive. If Jesus says, "No. Jews should not have to pay tax to the occupying Romans." ...then he is guilty of sedition and he can...and will...be executed by the Romans. His questioners think they've got him. Either way, they think, Jesus is going to lose...either his power with the people or his life to the Romans. They forgot Rule #1: Never get into a verbal sparring match with Jesus. He's always at least two steps ahead!!

Jesus doesn't answer right away. He asks to see the coin used to pay the tax. Despite the fact that the Pharisees protest that they detest this coin, they have no trouble producing one to show Jesus. Somebody pulls it from a pocket and hands it over. As he examines it, he sees Caesar's head on the coin, so he quietly says to them, "Render unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar and unto God that which belongs to God." Jesus was telling his followers...and us...that they and we have two allegiances: one to the civil authorities whose rules we live under and one to the teachings and commandments of God to whom we owe our very existence. Both the Jews in first century Palestine and the Christians in 21<sup>st</sup> century America are challenged to constantly and continuously decide what they owe and to whom they owe it.

As Christians, we know what we owe to God. Everything...our lives and our love and our worldly goods. Jesus seems to be saying to us that both civil authorities and our responsibilities as children of God have claim on our allegiance. Christians should render what is due to each entity until they come to the point where obedience to one leads to a moral conflict with the other. Then we have to make a choice. Jesus' answer puts all of us in the position of having to balance our responsibilities as citizens of both an earthly realm and a spiritual realm. These competing responsibilities that arise are never easy ones to answer, but Christians have never been excused from engaging in the struggle nevertheless.

Now...today...as much as any time in our lifetimes, we need to be wrestling with this very issue. How do we participate in a system of selecting our political leaders in a way that honors our commitment to Christ? That's not an easy question to answer, but answer it we must. If we profess to be followers of Jesus Christ, we can't forget all the things that he has taught us about how God expects us to live with our fellow human beings. How does Jesus instruct us about how we treat others? Didn't Jesus tell us who God favors when he gave us the Beatitudes in the

Sermon on the Mount? Didn't Jesus tell us to look after the poor? Didn't Jesus tell us to forgive others? Didn't he tell us to turn the other cheek rather than retaliate when we are hit...physically or verbally? Doesn't Jesus tell us to love our neighbor as ourselves? Doesn't that mean that when we cast a vote we can't think solely about our own self-interest, but we must consider a decision that will be loving toward our neighbor as well?

Religion and politics are not mutually exclusive...they are actually inter-dependent. What we believe and practice spiritually must influence the decisions and choices we make politically in the communities in which we live...whether our neighbors share our faith or follow a different faith or profess no faith at all. When we make our choices in the voting booth, we need to consider not just what we want for ourselves, but what we believe to be for the good of the whole. That's not a value or ethic that is promoted in this land of independent thinkers, but we are, in fact, inter-dependent. Decisions others make impact us and decisions we make impact others. If we are followers of Jesus Christ, we need to consider the good of the whole as well as our own self-interest...and sometimes those two things are mutually exclusive and we have to choose one or the other.

Jesus never promised us that following him would be easy. He never told us that it would be comfortable. He never said that we would be able to make decisions easily if we kept him in mind. Quite the contrary. He did warn us that if we were going to follow him, we would need to be willing to pick up our cross of self-sacrifice and worry more about others than we worried about ourselves. He told us to take up our cross and follow him. He didn't say it would be easy, but he promised to be with us to the end of the age. And we know that Jesus always keeps his promises.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.