

The Rev. Shelley Ryan  
St. Luke's Episcopal Church ~ Anchorage, Kentucky  
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (RCL alternate texts) July 2 & 3, 2016  
Mark 12:13-17 & Isaiah 26:1-8

In the past few years I have acquired an interest in collecting Christian Icons. Many of you may be familiar with icons, but for those who are not - an icon is characteristically a sacred painting, typically painted on wood or canvas, portraying Christ, Mary, and saints and angels. The icons are venerated within Eastern orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and also in some Episcopal, and Anglican churches.

One particular icon of Jesus that I admire is known as the Pantocrator. The Greek word pantocrator is translated as ruler of all, or sustainer of the world. This icon is frequently found in the highest most imposing space in the centrally located dome in a Byzantine Church where the icon of Christ pantocrator looks down from the heavens upon those worshipping below.

One interesting phenomenon that has been noted in many of the Christ pantocrator icons is that the eyes of Christ are asymmetrical. It has been conjectured that the eyes of Christ are asymmetrical because the eyes represent Jesus' dual perspective, and also His divinity and His humanity. One of Jesus' eyes is focused on the realm of the human world, while the other eye is focused upon the realm of God and His kingdom. It is however important to note that the two realms cannot be on the same plane of comparison.

Jesus' clever response to the Pharisees and Herodians provided an important teaching in that He called them, as He also calls us, to maintain ultimate allegiance to God, while living in the realm of the world its earthly powers. I suppose this could summon each of us to

ask the question - Whose image is imprinted on me? , or whose name is engraved upon my heart? We are likened to ‘coins’ minted in the image of almighty God. There are so many things that vie for our attention today, are there not? With all that is competing for our energy and allegiance, taking into account this election year and the recent tumultuous events that continue to occur, how do we stay the course and remain utterly assured that we are icons with God’s name written in each of our hearts.

Well, there are very practical steps that we can take to devote ourselves to collective and embodied spiritual practices that diminish our fears and calm our anxieties. Some of these practices that guide us to orient toward God are corporate worship, ministering to others in need, contemplative practices such as centering prayer, or lectio divina. When we take the time to engage in such practices as these we are drawn nearer to the heart of God, and this in turn strengthens us to navigate, to live, and to endure the demands of the world.

Theologian, priest and pivotal figure in the Protestant reformation Martin Luther (also, an iconoclast) refers to living in the realm of the world and living in the realm of God and having Him imprinted on our hearts, as the theology of [“two kingdoms.” This is usefully paraphrased by Pastor Tom Chryst as being *the idea that God rules the world in two different ways. Through earthly government and earthly authority he rules by laws and regulations (paying taxes, etc.). This is what Martin Luther coined as the left-hand kingdom. The right-hand kingdom is known as the realm of the church, the Gospel and God’s grace. This right-hand kingdom tends to be more foreign to us by nature, as it cannot be quantified or measured. It’s not black and white. However, we have a clearer understating of laws and regulations, and we know the expectations, as they are clearly spelled out for us, and are therefore less abstract and easier to abide by.*

As Christians and followers of Christ, I suppose one would say that we have a dual citizenship. We are in the world, but not of the world (a frequently used secular term). Paul alludes to this in the book of Romans. Martin Luther's theology of the "two kingdoms" does apply to us, and both kingdoms can be seen as a gift from God, because through both he brings order and blessings to His people. Yet as we continue to navigate living in the realm of the world let us also hold fast to living into the realm of God. If we can accomplish this we will experience a center, and this is where we will find out true north in God. Amen.