



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
“At Home” Worship
October 18, 2020

Gathering Around God’s Word

If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of the service. You can also call/FaceTime someone to worship together. (If you have a prayer request you would like added to the At- Home Worship service, please email Brooke office@wpceugene.org)

CALL TO WORSHIP

Sing to the Lord and bless God’s name.

Tell of God’s saving power from day to day.

Worship the Lord in holy splendor.

Tremble before God, all the earth.

OPENING HYMN

Come Sing, O Church, in Joy!

#305

CALL TO CONFESSION

God does not regard us with partiality, but with the grace of Christ Jesus deals with each of us according to our need. With gratitude for this grace, let us confess our sins.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Loving God, you have given us all things in Christ and yet we withhold from you the honor and glory that are yours. Instead, we mock your truth with empty praise, and put your patience to the test. Forgive us, O God, and by your grace restore in us the image of your face; through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

Let the heavens be glad and let the earth rejoice! Let the fields shout in celebration and the forests sing with joy: in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Thanks be to God.

The Word

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Holy God, through the message of the gospel and the power of your Spirit, make us imitators of the Lord Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 96:1-9

O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts. Worship the LORD in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth.

New Testament Reading: Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

ANTHEM

A Mighty Fortress is Our God

Ursula Damgaard

SERMON

"Serve Somebody"

Rev. David Ukropina

I have a bit of a confession to make. I'm a long time Bob Dylan fan. I've been a fan ever since high school, when I probably had every album he had made up to that point. I haven't followed his career as much in recent decades, but I've always been at least a little bit interested in what he's up to.

Now this may not sound like too much of a confession. After all, he's a highly regarded artist. But even fans like me have to acknowledge what a lot of critics of his do, that his voice is not the most pleasant one around. When I saw Dylan in concert in the 1980s, once music critic described his voice as "Dylan's concert wheeze that he's been perfecting for decades."

And back in the late 1970's, Dylan went through what fans of his refer to as his "born again Bob" phase, when for a few years, he became an evangelical Christian. And while this isn't exactly my favorite phase of his musical career, there are a few songs like *Every Grain of Sand* and *Jokerman* that I think are really good.

Another song from this period that you may or may not remember was *Gotta Serve Somebody*. It was a popular success and won the Grammy Award for best male vocal of 1979, which is again ironic given what I said earlier about the actual sound of his voice, which has been described as croaky, harsh, nasal, flaying, acrid and grating.

I thought of the song *Gotta Serve Somebody* when I read this week's gospel lesson from Matthew. The song lyrics that came to mind are from the refrain: You're gonna have to serve somebody/ Yes indeed you're gonna have to serve somebody/ Well it may be the devil or it may be the Lord / But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

Like many of the recent passages from Matthew's gospel, our lectionary passage this week needs a lot of background explanation. Remember that the central political reality during the time of Jesus was the Roman occupation of Palestine. As part of the occupation, people had to pay a lot of taxes, including a tax to the emperor, called the Imperial tax.

This tax was required as a tribute to Rome to support the Roman occupation of Israel. So think about that for a second. Jewish people had to pay a tax to the Romans to support them occupying Jewish land and oppressing the people. On top of that, the tax was paid with a coin that portrayed the emperor as a god, so in addition to being oppressive, it was also sacrilegious.

The Imperial tax was opposed by many Jewish people, but not all of them. One group that supported the tax was the Herodians, who as their name indicated, supported King Herod. The Pharisees, who were a religious reform group, objected to the tax on the grounds that it was blasphemous for carrying the image of the emperor as a god.

Now remember that old line about how the enemy of my enemy is my friend? Herodians and Pharisees would normally not like each other or want to be with one another. But here, in their mutual desire to trick and to trap Jesus, there is a forced geniality bred by collusion, and together they come up with a way to ensnare Jesus.

As we read about in the text, they first try to soften Jesus up with false flattery, and then they spring the trap by asking him “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” This is a trick question. If Jesus says yes, he will alienate most of the people because they were against the tax. If he says no, he could be arrested for sedition to the Roman authorities.

It’s kind of like one of those political “gotcha” questions, that are designed to trap people. An example would be asking some politician “What would you say to people who are accusing you of embezzling money?” Even trying to respond and defend yourself would validate the argument.

Jesus immediately sees what they are doing and calls them hypocrites, asking them why they are putting him to the test. He then asks them to produce the coin used for the tax. This immediately exposes his questioners, since they are carrying the offensive coin while Jesus is not.

The Pharisees and Herodians may have forgotten that by showing a coin with the emperor’s image on it, they indicated their own involvement with the Roman system. Everyone in the audience knew the commandments and knew that Jesus had just trapped his questioners in their own blasphemy.

Jesus then tells them, and us, to “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperors, and to God the things that are God’s.” In responding this way, Jesus turns the tables on his questioners, and at the same time he both exposed them in their plot and called them to a higher accountability to God.

Now through the centuries, Christians and theologians have debated about a number of issues connected with this text, including questions about the right relationship between obedience to the government and obedience to God. Other parts of the Bible address this issue too, such as Paul does in Romans 13 when he argues that Christians should be responsible to the civil authority, which is itself ultimately under God.

These questions have run through history up to the present day in areas like the separation of church and state, the whole question of taxes imposed by the government, and legal and ethical questions that come up any time both religion and secular government are involved with each other.

But as I’ve been reading and studying the text this week, the main thing that’s been standing out to me is the way that Jesus, in this passage and elsewhere, is calling us to give our ultimate allegiance to God. Jesus tells us we can give the emperor his coin, but there is no limit on giving our loyalty to God.

That’s what reminded me of the Bob Dylan song. Jesus is calling us to ultimately serve God. We may have other people and things we will serve at times – the government, our jobs, our families, people we care about, but ultimately, we have to serve just one person who is above all others.

And of course Jesus is talking not just to the Herodians and the Pharisees, but to us as well. Sometimes this passage is read as presenting us as having dual responsibilities, to both God and to country. But what I hear Jesus saying to us here is that our primary duty, above all others, is to God.

We all know that right now is a very charged time politically. This year has been very divisive, and we

are just weeks away from a consequential election. Many of us and many of those in our lives have strong political views. We may be Democrats, Republicans or Independents.

But above any of these views, we who call ourselves Christians are Christians first. Jesus should be our first loyalty, above all others. There are important elements of our lives that are part of the world and should be “rendered unto Caesar.” But there are other parts of our lives, at the center of who we are, that belong to God alone.

As I was thinking about all of these things, I was reminded of the famous opening of the Heidelberg Catechism, which was a major faith declaration of the Reformation period, being completed in 1562. It came out of a time of conflict between Lutherans and the Reformed church, and strove to find a common statement both could affirm.

You may remember that a catechism was meant for instruction, and took the form of a question and answer statement. In the first question, the catechism asks, “What is your only comfort, in life and in death?” And the response is, “That I belong- body and soul, in life and in death-not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.”

I take this to mean that no matter what we may do or say, no matter where we may go, no matter what may happen to us, we are first and foremost and forever God’s own children. And if we believe this and live this, God will shape what we say and what we do. We belong to God. We are God’s children.

And one way this really helps us in our lives is that it puts everything else in proper perspective. That helps us to not develop idolatrous relationships with other things of lesser importance. I mentioned politics before. I’ve noticed a tendency of people to invest government, politicians and presidents with way more hope and expectation than they deserve.

No political movement or personal relationship or institution can ever satisfy for us the ultimate longing for perfection that we have in our hearts and souls, one that only God can deliver. Knowing this can help keep us on a steadier level, one where we don’t find ourselves looking elsewhere to satisfy what only God can.

This can help with perspective. I remember watching one of the major golf tournaments one year, where a golfer who had never won before was leading heading into the fourth and final day. A reporter asked him if he was nervous. He said yes, but he also mentioned that his first child had been born a few months earlier, and something about that event was so enormous that it put everything else in proper perspective and kept him steady.

I think that’s kind of how it is with God. Just like the birth of a child suddenly made golf seem a whole lot smaller, so can us being in touch with God make everything else seem much smaller by comparison. That’s not to say things like family and work and even politics aren’t important. They just aren’t ultimately important.

I mentioned before the Heidelberg Catechism, and as I was preparing this sermon, I was also reminded of the famous Barmen Declaration, which was written in the 1930s in response to the rise of fascism in Germany. At the time, Hitler and the Nazis were trying to place all social institutions in Germany under the Reich and under the power of the Fuhrer, including the church.

Theologian Karl Barth and others objected to this based on the grounds of what we’ve been talking about with this passage and this sermon. In one section of the declaration, they wrote “We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation.”

Karl Barth and the other writers of Barmen understood what Jesus proclaims in our passage today. There are other parts of our lives that deserve some loyalty, but only God deserves our ultimate loyalty. We are ultimately going to have serve somebody, and as Christians, we know who we serve. Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH – from The Heidelberg Catechism

What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death- not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him. Amen.

Responding to God's Word

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

Loving God, may your Spirit empower us to imitate you, by receiving those who feel judged and rejected, by encouraging those who tend to the broken, by affirming those who labor in love...

We lift into your care those whose bodies, minds or spirits have been weakened...

We lift up to your grace those whose burdens, built or fears seem to massive to bear...

We lift before your mercy those whose hatred, rage, or vengeance cannot be contained...

Receive all these cares, loving God, and fill us with the light of Christ, who taught us to pray...

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Sending of God's Word

CLOSING HYMN

Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise

#12

BENEDICTION

And now may the Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.

-Genesis, 31:49