

**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost A
Incarnation Lutheran Church**

GIVE TO THE EMPEROR...

IT'S THAT TIME OF THE YEAR – THAT TIME WHEN POSTERS ABOUT STEWARDSHIP, PLEDGE CARDS, TEMPLE TALKS, EVEN LETTERS FROM PASTORS ABOUT FINANCIAL GIVING BEGIN TO APPEAR. IT'S THAT TIME OF THE YEAR WHEN THE CHURCH MOST OFTEN, MISTAKINGLY SO, BUT MOST OFTEN LIFTS UP THIS WORD STEWARDSHIP WITH A NARROW EMPHASIS ON JUST ONE ASPECT – OUR FINANCIAL GIVING. BUT STEWARDSHIP IS OH SO MUCH MORE. SO, I'M THINKING WE COULD HAVE NO BETTER GOSPEL TEXT BEFORE US THIS MORNING THAN THIS DIALOGUE BETWEEN JESUS AND THE PHARISEES ABOUT GIVING TO THE EMPEROR THAT WHICH IS THE EMPEROR'S....

IT'S AN INTERESTING INTERCHANGE. THE ORGANIZED PLOTTING BY THE RELIGIOUS HIERARCHY OF THE DAY TO GET RID OF JESUS IS INTENSIFYING – AND JESUS KNOWS IT. AND, HE KNOWS THIS IS A SETUP. HE KNOWS THEY'RE USING A POLITICAL TACTIC – TRYING TO HOOK HIM WITH SWEET AND AFFIRMING WORDS BEFORE THEY COMPLETELY TEAR HIM DOWN. HE KNOWS THAT WHEN THEY SAY TO HIM, "YOU ARE SO SINCERE AND YOU TEACH GOD'S TRUTH JUST

EXACTLY RIGHT AND YOU PUT GOD FIRST IN EVERYTHING YOU DO. WE KNOW HOW WISE YOU ARE – SO PLEASE ANSWER US JUST THIS ONE QUESTION. IS IT LAWFUL TO PAY TAXES TO THE EMPEROR OR NOT?” HE KNOWS IT’S A SETUP. AND SO, WITH SOME DEGREE OF SHREWDNESS AND SARCASM OF HIS OWN, JESUS ANSWERS , “GIVE TO THE EMPEROR THE THINGS THAT ARE THE EMPEROR’S AND TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD’S.”

I WANT US TO PONDER THAT THIS MORNING – GIVE TO THE EMPEROR THE THINGS THAT ARE THE EMPEROR’S AND TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD’S. AND I WANT US TO DO THAT BY LIVING A FEW MINUTES WITH THIS QUESTION. DO WE NOT BELIEVE IT ALL BELONGS TO GOD?

A STORY...

A SCIENTIST, WHO WAS ALSO AN EMERGING ATHEIST, APPROACHED GOD AND SAID, “YOU KNOW, THE MORE I LEARN, THE MORE I KNOW - THE MORE I REALIZE THAT WE DON’T NEED YOU ANYMORE. NOWADAYS, WE HUMANS CAN DO ALL SORTS OF THINGS THAT USED TO BE CONSIDERED MIRACULOUS ACTS OF GOD. WE CAN TRANSPLANT ORGANS, GIVING NEW LIFE TO SERIOUSLY ILL AND DYING PEOPLE. WE CAN CURE MOST DISEASES AND ARE WELL ON OUR WAY

TO CONQUERING THE REMAINING KILLER DISEASES AS WELL. WE CAN GROW HUMAN CELLS IN TEST TUBES. WE CAN ALREADY CLONE ANIMALS AND IT WON'T BE LONG UNTIL CLONING HUMANS WILL BE AN EVERYDAY THING. IN FACT, I ALREADY KNOW HOW TO DO THAT. I CAN DO THAT RIGHT NOW. SO, I'M SORRY, GOD. YOU'RE OUTDATED – NOT NEEDED ANYMORE.”

GOD PATIENTLY WAITED UNTIL THE SCIENTIST WAS FINISHED SPEAKING AND THEN REPLIED, “OK, I HEAR YOU, BUT BEFORE YOU COMPLETELY DISMISS ME, LET ME TAKE YOU UP ON YOUR OFFER. LET'S BOTH CREATE A HUMAN BEING – RIGHT NOW – AND LET'S DO IT MY ORIGINAL WAY – THE WAY I CREATED ADAM AND EVE. “ NO PROBLEM,” SAID THE ARROGANT YOUNG SCIENTIST AND HE REACHED DOWN TO SCOOP UP A HANDFUL OF DIRT. “HOLD ON,” GOD SAID. “HOLD ON. YOU NEED TO USE YOUR OWN DIRT.”

AND THAT'S TRUE, ISN'T IT? GOD DID CREATE THE DIRT – AND EVERYTHING ELSE IN THIS WORLD OF OURS. THINK BACK ON THOSE WORDS OF THE FIRST CHAPTER OF GENESIS...WORDS THAT TAKE US BACK TO EVEN BEFORE THE BEGINNING OF TIME...TO THE CHAOS OUT OF WHICH GOD SPOKE...AND THERE WAS LIGHT AND DARKNESS, DAY AND NIGHT. SKY AND SEAS CAME FORTH. EARTH AND ITS

VEGETATION CAME INTO BEING. SUN AND MOON DRAPED THE HEAVENS. BIRDS FLEW IN THE SKIES AND FISH SWAM IN THE OCEANS....ANIMALS WALKED THE DRY LAND. AND THEN CAME GOD'S MOST MAGNIFICANT CREATION OF ALL...."LET US CREATE HUMANKIND IN OUR OWN IMAGE," GOD SAID. "AND IT WAS SO...AND IT WAS GOOD, VERY GOOD." IT REALLY DOES ALL BELONG TO GOD. WE BELONG TO GOD. ALL THAT WE HAVE BELONGS TO GOD. THIS EARTH - THE UNIVERSE - IT ALL BELONGS TO GOD. AND THAT'S THE FOUNDATION UPON WHICH THE CHURCH BUILDS ITS TEACHINGS ABOUT STEWARDSHIP. THAT'S THE STARTING POINT. IT ALL BELONGS TO GOD.

WHICH BRINGS US THEN TO OUR CALL TO BE STEWARDS OF ALL THAT GOD HAS GIVEN US. AND SO ANOTHER QUESTION. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN - TO BE A STEWARD OF GOD? THERE'S A BEAUTIFUL OFFERTORY PRAYER - THE PRAYER PRAYED AS OUR FINANCIAL GIFTS ARE BROUGHT FORWARD AND OFFERED TO GOD - IT GOES LIKE THIS: "MERCIFUL FATHER, WE OFFER WITH JOY AND THANKSGIVING WHAT YOU HAVE FIRST GIVEN US -OURSELVES, OUR TIME, AND OUR POSSESSIONS, SIGNS OF YOUR GRACIOUS LOVE. RECEIVE THEM FOR THE SAKE OF HIM WHO OFFERED HIMSELF FOR US, JESUS CHRIST OUR

LORD.” THAT’S WHAT BEING A STEWARD REALLY MEANS – GIVING BACK TO GOD – NOT BECAUSE OF DUTY AND OBLIGATION –BUT WITH JOY AND THANKSGIVING , GIVING BACK TO GOD , THROUGH HOLY LIVING AND SERVICE TO OTHERS, THAT WHICH ALREADY BELONGS TO GOD IN THE FIRST PLACE.

DR. MARK ALAN POWELL, IN HIS BOOK *GIVING TO GOD* , REMINDS US THAT IT IS THROUGH THE WATERS OF BAPTISM THAT GOD ESTABLISHES A RELATIONSHIP WITH US WHICH EMPOWERS US TO BE FAITHFUL STEWARDS. IN WATER AND WORD, GOD NAMES US, CLAIMS US, MARKS US WITH THE CROSS OF CHRIST AND SEALS US WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT FOREVER. DR. POWELL CALLS THIS “WALKING WET” AND STEWARDSHIP, HE SAYS, IS ALL ABOUT WALKING WET WITH GOD - ALL THE DAYS OF OUR LIVES. AND HE PROCEEDS THEN TO TELL THIS STORY.

THERE’S A LEGEND, HE SAYS, ABOUT THE BAPTISM OF THE GAULS, A WARLIKE PEOPLE WHO IN ANCIENT TIMES INHABITED WHAT IS NOW FRANCE AND BELGIUM. BY THE TIME OF THE CHRISTIAN ERA, THEY HAD BEEN CONQUERED BY THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND WERE SUPPOSEDLY UNDER ITS CONTROL. THE EXTENT OF THIS CONTROL VARIED, HOWEVER, FOR THE GAULS NEVER DID TAKE TOO WELL TO

BEING CONQUERED. OFTEN, THERE WERE FREQUENT UPRISINGS FROM THESE WARLIKE PEOPLE. OVER TIME, THOUGH, CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES VENTURED INTO THEIR TERRITORIES AND CONVERTED THEM TO CHRISTIANITY...OR MAYBE NOT...BECAUSE, AS THE STORY GOES, WHEN A CONVERTED WARRIOR WAS BAPTIZED IN A RIVER OR STREAM, HE WOULD HOLD ONE ARM HIGH IN THE AIR AS THE MISSIONARY DUNKED HIM UNDER THE WATER. AT FIRST, THE MISSIONARIES WONDERED AMONG THEMSELVES ABOUT THIS ODD PRACTICE UNTIL THEY OBSERVED WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THE NEXT UPRISING OCCURRED. AND HERE'S WHAT THEY SAW. THOSE BAPTIZED, WARLIKE GAULS WOULD HOLD THAT ONE ARM UP AND PROCLAIM LOUDLY..."THIS ARM IS NOT BAPTIZED" ...AND THEN PROCEED TO GRAB CLUBS OR SWORDS AND ATTACK AND DESTROY THEIR ENEMY IN A MOST UNCHRISTIAN LIKE WAY.

WHAT AN IMAGE, DR. POWELL SAYS, OF SOMEONE TRYING TO KEEP ONE PART OF THEIR BODY, ONE ASPECT OF THEIR IDENTITY, FREE FROM THE WATERS OF BAPTISM. IS IT POSSIBLE, HE ASKS, THAT WE ALSO TRY TO KEEP SOME ASPECT OF OUR LIVES DRY - AWAY FROM THE POWER OF HOLY BAPTISM? OUR TIME, PERHAPS...OUR GIFTS FOR VARIOUS MINISTRIES...OUR MONEY?

**STEWARDSHIP IS ABOUT GETTING COMPLETELY WET. IT'S
ABOUT REMEMBERING THAT IT ALL BELONGS TO GOD – AND IT'S ALL
ABOUT GIVING TO GOD THAT WHICH ALREADY IS GOD'S.
STEWARDSHIP IS ABOUT LOOKING AT OURSELVES AND DISCOVERING
WHAT IT IS THAT WE WOULD LIKE TO KEEP DRY....AND THEN
IMMERSING WHATEVER THAT IS IN THOSE WATERS OF HOLY BAPTISM
SO THAT NOT ONLY ALL I HAVE, BUT ALL THAT I AM WALKS WET
WITH GOD. ALL THE DAYS OF MY LIFE. MAY GOD HELP US ALL SO TO
DO. AMEN.**