

## *Sunday Sermon October 18, 2020*

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

PROPER 24

ISAIAH 45:1-7

PSALM 96:1-9

I THESSALONIANS 1:1-10

MATTHEW 22: 15-22

EVEN FOR THE MOST BIBLICALLY ILLITERATE THERE ARE A FEW BIBLE STORIES THAT JUST PLAIN STAND OUT. OUR GOSPEL LESSON TODAY INCLUDES ONE OF THOSE STORIES. YOU ALL KNOW IT SO WELL. JESUS IS ACCOSTED IN THE TEMPLE AT JERUSALEM BY A GROUP OF PHARISEES WHO ARE DETERMINED TO TRAP HIM. THEY POSE A QUESTION TO JESUS THAT APPARENTLY CAN ONLY BE ANSWERED ONE OF TWO WAYS.

THE QUESTION IS THIS: "IS IT LAWFUL TO PAY TAXES TO THE EMPEROR, OR NOT?" SEEMS PRETTY STRAIGHT FORWARD . ALL THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONVERSATION ARE LIVING IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE. THAT'S THE CIVIL AUTHORITY. SO WHAT'S THE FUSS?

APPARENTLY, THERE ARE A LOT OF ON-LOOKERS TO THIS SCENE. THE PHARISEES SENT THEIR DISCIPLES, THEIR STUDENTS, TO ASK THE QUESTION AND TO SWEETEN THE SITUATION THEY SEND ALONG SOME HERODIANS. YOU WILL RECALL THAT HERODIANS WERE JEWS WHO WERE SUPPORTERS OF THE LOCAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE, KING HEROD. THEY WOULD BE ALL FOR PAYING THE TAXES. AND THERE IS SPECULATION THAT THERE CERTAINLY WOULD HAVE BEEN SOME ZEALOTS STANDING BY. THE ZEALOT PARTY WERE THOSE JEWS WHO WERE STRONGLY SUPPORTING REBELLION AGAINST THE EMPIRE. THE LATTER CERTAINLY WOULD ENCOURAGE NOT PAYING TAXES TO THE ENEMY.

THE PHARISEES ARE QUITE CERTAIN THAT JESUS IS TRAPPED EITHER WAY. AGREE TO PAY THE TAXES AND SHOW YOURSELF A COLLABORATOR WITH THE ROMAN OPPRESSORS. REFUSE TO PAY AND BE GUILTY OF SEDITION.

BUT EVERYBODY KNOWS THE OUTCOME. JESUS IS TOO SMART FOR THEM ALL. HE ASKS THEM TO LOOK AT A COIN OF THE REALM AND SEE WHOSE PICTURE IS ON IT. WHY IT'S CAESAR, OF COURSE IT IS! JESUS SAYS, "WHOSE HEAD IS THIS, AND WHOSE TITLE?" AND HE CONCLUDES, THEN "GIVE TO THE EMPEROR THE THINGS THAT ARE THE EMPEROR'S, AND TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S."

MOST PEOPLE REMEMBER IT AS, "RENDER ONTO CAESAR THE THINGS THAT ARE CAESAR'S AND TO GOD, THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S." MATTHEW, MARK AND LUKE ALL TELL THE STORY WHICH LETS US KNOW THIS STORY MATTERS.

I KEEP THINKING ABOUT ALL THE POINTS THAT JESUS COULD HAVE MADE ABOUT LOYALTY TO THE RULING CLASS AS OPPOSED TO LOYALTY TO GOD. BUT JESUS DOES NOT SAY ANYTHING MORE. THE STORY ENDS WITH ALL THE ONLOOKERS BEING AMAZED AT JESUS' RESPONSE. THE STORY CONCLUDES, "THEY LEFT HIM AND WENT AWAY." APPARENTLY ALL THAT CONCERNED JESUS WAS TO GET OUT OF THEIR TRAP AND MOVE ON.

THE NEXT STORY IS SIMILAR. IT'S ABOUT SOME SADDUCEES WHO COME ALONG. THEY ALSO TRY TO TRAP JESUS WITH ANOTHER QUESTION. THESE WERE HIGH-STATUS PRIESTS AND HAD THE CHIEF RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE TEMPLE WORSHIP AND ITS EMPHASIS ON SACRIFICE. THEY DID NOT BELIEVE IN RESURRECTION AND SO THEY WANTED TO EXPOSE JESUS AS ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE ISSUE. SUFFICE IT TO SAY THAT JESUS CONFOUNDS THESE CHARACTERS TOO, WHO THEN GO OFF IN A HUFF HAVING BEEN MADE TO LOOK FOOLISH.

YOU COULD SAY THAT JESUS PROVES IN THESE STORIES TO BE GOOD AT BOBBING AND WEAVING. IT TOOK ME A WHILE TO REALIZE WHAT IS REALLY GOING ON HERE. JESUS SEES THAT THEY WANT ONLY ONE THING. TO STOP HIM FROM PREACHING AND SPEAKING.

YOU WILL FIND BY READING THIS WHOLE SECTION OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW THAT ALL SORTS OF LEADERS AND INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE ARE TRYING TO TEST, ENTRAP, CHALLENGE AND DISCREDIT JESUS.

HE IS ON A MISSION. WE, BEING LONG-TIME STUDENTS OF THE BIBLE, KNOW WHAT IS TO COME. JESUS HAS ARRIVED IN JERUSALEM TO GIVE HIS LIFE FOR THE HUMAN FAMILY. HE IS ON HIS WAY TO THE CROSS TO PROVE ONCE AND FOR ALL HOW VALUABLE WE ARE TO GOD. YOU MIGHT SAY THAT JESUS THINKS THE RIGHT QUESTION TO ASK IS; "DO WE REALLY BELIEVE THAT WE ARE PRECIOUS TO GOD? DO WE BELIEVE THAT GOD LOVES US BEYOND OUR ABILITY TO GRASP, TO UNDERSTAND, TO ACCEPT?" THE QUESTION IS "WHY WOULD THE SON OF GOD OFFER TO DIE FOR US? THE ANSWER IS ALSO VERY APPARENT IN SCRIPTURES. THERE IS STORY AFTER STORY OF GOD'S PURSUING US BECAUSE OF A DEEP AND EVERLASTING LOVE FOR US.

IT IS NOT POPULAR IN OUR PRESENT DAY TO SAY THAT THE MOST POWERFUL SOURCE IN THE UNIVERSE IS THE LOVE OF GOD, BUT THAT IS OUR FAITH, OUR FIRM BELIEF. SOMEHOW PEOPLE IN POWER SEEM TO THINK THAT THIS LOVE SOMEHOW WILL DIMINISH THEM. AS WE HAVE SEEN THESE LAST FEW WEEKS OF GOSPEL STORIES, HOW MUCH THE POWERS THAT BE WANTED TO EXTINGUISH THE LIGHT OF THIS LOVE THAT GOD HAS SENT INTO THE WORLD.

GREATER LOVE HAS NO ONE THAN THIS, TO GIVE UP ONE'S LIFE FOR ONE'S FRIEND. WHY DO WE HUMANS STRUGGLE SO HARD IN OUR HEADS RATHER THAN OPEN OUR HEARTS?" WE KEEP JOINING THE STRUGGLE TO UNDERSTAND WHAT DO WE HAVE TO DO TO INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN? WHAT DO WE HAVE TO DO TO LEAVE A LEGACY BEHIND? WHAT MUST WE PROVE TO CONVINCING OURSELVES AND EACH OTHER THAT WE ARE VALUABLE, PRECIOUS, LOVED OF GOD JUST AS WE ARE?

THIS WHOLE SECTION OF MATTHEW CONCLUDES AT THE END OF CHAPTER 25 AND THEN JESUS TURNS TO HIS DISCIPLES AND SAYS: "YOU KNOW THAT AFTER TWO DAYS THE PASSOVER IS COMING, AND THE SON OF MAN WILL BE HANDED OVER TO BE CRUCIFIED. HIS DETRACTORS STANDING BY DECIDE THE TIME HAS COME TO ARREST HIM BY STEALTH AND DISPOSE OF HIM.

JESUS IS READY. HE'S PARRIED THEIR ATTACKS, HE'S GIVEN HIS DISCIPLES AND FOLLOWERS A PICTURE OF WHAT THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN WILL BE LIKE AND HE SETS HIS EYES UPON THE CROSS. SO EVERYTHING UP TO THIS POINT HAS BEEN PRELUDE TO THE ANSWER FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL: "FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON THAT WHOSOEVER BELIEVED IN HIM SHOULD NOT PERISH BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.

IN SHORT, THE MESSAGE IS, THE LOVE OF GOD BRINGS LIFE THAT CONQUERS DEATH – THAT SURVIVES BEYOND THE POWER OF THE GRAVE. WE ARE LOVED SO MUCH AND GREATER LOVE HAS NO ONE THAN THIS, TO GIVE ONE'S LIFE FOR A FRIEND. THE STORY UP TO HERE HAS BEEN ABOUT THE ATTEMPTS ON JESUS' LIFE, THE DISCREDITING OF JESUS' WORDS, AND THE ATTEMPTS TO PAINT HIM AS SEDITIOUS, DISLOYAL TO HIS FAITH, A CHARLATAN AND A FALSE PROPHET. AND FEARLESSLY AND LOVINGLY JESUS CONTINUES HIS JOURNEY TO. THE CROSS. THE ANCIENT SYMBOL OF DEATH IS TRANSFORMED INTO A PROMISE OF LIFE.

WE LIKE CHRIST CAN TAKE THIS SAME JOURNEY WITH THE COURAGE THAT ONLY COMES FROM KNOWING WE ARE LOVED WITH A PERFECT LOVE BY THE GOD OF ALL CREATION. AS JOHN'S FIRST LETTER PUTS IT, "PERFECT LOVE CASTS OUT FEAR AND BUILDS US LOVINGLY INTO THE BODY OF CHRIST.

AMEN.