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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24)  
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Lectionary Year A: Matthew 22:15-22

Back in my Lutheran days, I recall a lot of time and energy devoted to Martin Luther's theological/political theory of the two kingdoms. According to this theory, there is a "kingdom on the left," which is the kingdom of creation; in the left-hand kingdom, the government, civil authorities, military, and so on are given to us by God to promote the common good. Then there is the "kingdom on the right," which is the kingdom of redemption; in the right-hand kingdom, there is the Church, the proclamation of the Gospel, the Sacraments, and so on, where God offers us eternal salvation. Let me remind you that this is a theory and that not everyone adheres to it; chief among Brother Martin's adversaries on this matter would be fellow Reformer from Geneva, John Calvin, who, to simplify the matter a bit, espoused more of a "one kingdom" theory. The two kingdoms, though, might shed a little light on the present state of affairs in this country.

Luther saw a coexistence of the two kingdoms as a way for Christianity to maintain its distinctive character and yet remain engaged in the world. In this framework, you neither taint Christianity with nationalistic zealotry nor force the state to bend toward your beliefs. This is precisely the sort of insight that Christ himself brings to the Pharisees when they try to corner him with their question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Now, Jesus' conclusion is one that ought to ring some bells, even if the newer translation renders it differently. Jesus declares, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21b). It would seem that Jesus has struck the right balance here; you

neither engage in tax evasion nor neglect your offering to God. Going back to Luther's language, the kingdom on the left receives its due and the kingdom on the right receives its due. In short, you can be faithful to God without breaking the law of the land.

But simply because rational, intelligent human beings are aware of these things doesn't mean they'll occasionally have confused loyalties. It may be entirely possible for them to give to the emperor the things that are God's and give to God the things that are the emperor's. Ultimate loyalty and faithfulness does belong to God alone, and to subsume God beneath the emperor is idolatry, plain and simple. Something equally problematic is seeing God or God's will embodied in persons of political power. That is giving to the emperor the things that are God's.

Now that election season is rolling around, we are reminded of American Christianity's unique relationship with American politics, and of how the lines between the two can be blurred. And every once in a while, some news story rolls around of a pastor expecting his parishioners to vote for a particular candidate for public office. Folks, that's a big problem. IRS tax exempt status notwithstanding, Jesus himself reminds us that the spiritual and the political reflect two separate and distinct sets of loyalties. Now, keep in mind that, as a religious leader, I say this neither to discriminate against religion nor to discourage patriotism or good citizenship. Rather, I want to instill a sense of respect and appropriateness in the various spheres we inhabit.

I'll give you an example. You all know of my love of the automobile, and that this love has made it into more than a few of my sermons in the form of stories, illustrations, and the like. However, I would never use, say, a funeral sermon or a community tragedy as an opportunity to talk about my cars. It just wouldn't be the appropriate situation in which to talk about myself or my hobbies. Among

those who wouldn't think that my cheese was slipping off my cracker, there would likely be a consensus that I was a complete narcissist...maybe even confusing God with myself.

Jesus tells you and me today, "You know better." When the Pharisees pressed him on the matter of paying taxes, he tells them the very same thing. Some matters simply aren't matters of religious piety or civic responsibility. Paying taxes doesn't make you holy and going to church doesn't make you a good citizen, even though good Christians ought to pay their taxes and be good citizens. What the Pharisees were likely worried about is if paying taxes made them disobedient Jews, because that could be seen as serving two competing "lords." Jesus re-frames the issue altogether and sees religion and the state co-existing but not competing.

And Martin Luther would call this a case of two kingdoms...each calling people to distinct and specific responsibilities in the civic and the religious worlds. The advice for you and for me in this regard is quite simple: Do what is appropriate for the given venue.

Today's Gospel text could also have some unintended implications, however. If it is the emperor's image on the coin, then one could also conclude that money has no place in God's house. Certainly, there has been a tendency in many faiths to think of money as un-spiritual and even dirty, so the only reason we have it in holy places like this is because we need it. This makes an interesting counterpoint to our stewardship campaign which began earlier this month...

Well, money is neither un-spiritual nor dirty. It can actually tell you much about a person spiritually. For example, greediness reflects a lack of faith in a God who provides, and generosity reflects an abundance of that very same faith. Even I need to be reminded of this, because it is easy to get nervous when the

money isn't rolling in. You can give yourself a pat on the back, however, for keeping this church on firm financial ground throughout the Covid crisis; you see, faith is revealed best in times of adversity, and -- especially now -- it is our calling to keep both the faith in God and the faith in ourselves. Being discouraged and despairing does little in the way of witness to our faith. A good spiritual exercise for us might be to avoid worry and reflect that in our giving of ourselves, our time, and our possessions.

But there's only so much I can control in this place. And that's a good thing, because God is really the One who's in control. After I get done preaching the sermon and saying the liturgy, my time is up. I've said my piece, I'm turning it over to you, and I'm letting God handle whatever else needs to be taken care of. And you have the utmost freedom as to what to do with yourselves and what you have. As you have entrusted me with the ministry of Word and Sacrament in this place, I now entrust you to your ministries. I am confident that you know what to do and what is right. Most of you have been around here a whole lot longer than I have, and about the only thing I can do is proclaim the glorious vision that Jesus offers us every day.

I take no delight in failure, and, given that fact, allow me to be this parish's greatest cheerleader...even if the cheerleader may sound more like a critic at times. Whatever we do as a community of faith, though, needs to be done in love and in respect of each other, for a lack of love and respect will break us to pieces. If church life is for the building up of the body of Christ, then may all of us clearly see that what we give to God benefits the whole body.

But the body can suffer in various places at various times. And an ache or a pain in one place inevitably affects the whole. There is something of a mutual care that we have for each other, and that care can ease the pains of the entire body.

That's the advantage -- indeed, the splendor -- of being united for the sake of each other in the name of Christ.

And like any good rabbi, Jesus offers wisdom more than he offers answers. May what he says to us today stir up within us abilities of recognition and discernment...recognizing issues, problems, and concerns and discerning new approaches and solutions. Of all the abilities we could possibly cultivate, may this be the one. Know what is appropriate for the time and place. When your country calls you to offer the appropriate dues, give as you ought. When your church calls you to offer the appropriate thanksgiving, give as you are able.

While Martin Luther saw people living in two kingdoms, it seems as if we actually live in many more. But regardless of how many "worlds" we occupy, let us ultimately see them co-existing -- or even complimenting -- rather than competing. Let us respond appropriately to the needs of each, remembering that God does not receive the emperor's dues and the emperor does not receive God's dues. The kingdom of creation, messy as it may seem, still exists as ordained by God for the common, public good. And the kingdom of redemption gives us a glimpse of creation transformed by Christ. One is permanently imperfect, the other is perfection on its way. At the very least, let's try to keep them from messing each other up.

If Christ teaches us anything, they won't!

Amen.