



Pentecost 20-October 18, 2020  
Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish  
Matthew 22:15-22

## “Two Kingdoms”

-Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

*Grace and peace to you from God our father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*As I read the gospel for today, I couldn't help but see a similarity in how Jesus answered the people who came to trap him in what he said, to the presidential debates or the debates between their vice-presidential running mates. I know that's quite a stretch to compare Jesus to any of these candidates, but the connection I noticed was when Jesus was asked a straightforward question and how he responded was similar to the recent debates. Jesus was asked a question that is often called a closed ended question. This is a question that demands a simple “yes” or “no” response. But as in the debates you may have watched for the upcoming election, Jesus seems to have completely ignored the question that was asked and responded with something else that doesn't seem to have anything to do with what was asked. But also similar to the current debates, the intent of the ones asking the question is not just to receive helpful information, but the intent is to trap someone by what they say. So, they ask a question that gets you into trouble with one side or another.*

*At this point in Jesus' ministry, the people have given up on trapping Jesus in what he has done. The only question people can raise in his works is that he shows no partiality. Jesus heals everyone. People have been eyewitnesses to examples of miracles and healings of Jesus that no one else has been able to perform. If Jesus is going to be trapped, they will have to trap him by what he says since it would be impossible for them to trap Jesus in what he does. When Jesus said, “Be healed”. It happened. If Jesus wants to feed thousands of people with two fish and five bread loaves, he does it even when anyone else would have taken a day off for bereavement since Jesus had wanted to get away from the crowds to mourn the death of his friend John the Baptist. Jesus always cared for others before caring for himself. When a man came to Jesus with a son who had a demon that no one including his disciples could help, Jesus rebuked the demon from the boy, and he was healed. If Jesus wants to walk on the water rather than wait for the boat to get to the shore, Jesus will walk on the water while anyone else will sink to the bottom. So today, when the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians approach Jesus, they know they cannot trap Jesus by what he can do. Their only hope is to trap Jesus by what he will say. They hope to trap Jesus in his words. So, they ask a question that will trap Jesus no matter if he says yes or he says no.*

*Jesus can smell the scent that is on the trap as he watches the disciples of the Pharisees and Herodians approach him. The Herodians and the Pharisees had nothing in common. They were nearly as polar opposites as our presidential candidates present themselves. Having these two groups come to Jesus would be like President Trump and Joe Biden coming to the debate with the same ideas. But Jesus knows their intentions and calls them hypocrites. This is an especially appropriate description for them because this origin of this word hypocrite actually means “one who*

acts". It is speculated that the disciples of the Pharisees that joined the Herodians in this common cause likely even disguised themselves to look like the Herodians in an attempt to deceive Jesus in what part they were playing. But Jesus quickly saw through their disguises and called them out on their evil intent asking them why they are putting him to the test.

They begin their trapping by complimenting Jesus. They have witnessed his sincerity, his truth, and how he doesn't just go along with the crowd to get along with the crowd. But these insincere compliments are followed by the question they concocted to trap him, "Teacher (they even address him as if they want to learn from him), "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

In this short question, several words reveal their effort to trap Jesus. They ask Jesus what he "thinks". They want his opinion. We all know, again the recent debates give us fresh examples of differing opinions. We know that for every opinion there is an opposing or different opinion. The group however failed to remember that Jesus speaks in truth and not by debatable opinions. They also ask, Is it "lawful"? Again, every law that protects someone also may infringe the freedoms of someone else. There are always two sides of a law and these two groups are on each side of this law. And of course, whenever you hear the word "taxes" you can be certain that there is one side promoting a tax and another avoiding paying that particular tax and promoting a different tax. If Jesus says "yes" it is lawful to pay taxes he has sided with the Herodians and it seems that he has forgotten the poor who he came to help. If he says "no" he has sided with the Pharisees and the poor but opposed the Roman government who are in control. But Jesus doesn't fall for the trap. Jesus begins to confound the trappers with this statement. "Show me the coin used for the tax".

They start to slip into Jesus' trap. Jesus doesn't pull a coin out of his own pocket. Nor does Jesus ask to hold the coin. He simply asks to see it and you can almost see all of them digging in their pockets to show the coin, but then realizing that Jesus has just trapped them. After seeing the coin, Jesus asks, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" The jaws of Jesus' trap continue to close as they answer, "the emperors". Jesus closes the trap when he responds to them, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's."

In this statement, Jesus makes the distinction between two kingdoms. The kingdom that we live in and the kingdom of God. And Jesus says "give" to both. Jesus tells us to pay taxes and to give back to God what is God's. Coincidentally, I just met with my accountant on Friday morning to get some yearend tax advice. I also paid my property taxes that day so I wouldn't forget them at the end of this month. I didn't have the option of saying that I am a pastor and telling them that since everything is God's and I work for him; I don't have to pay any taxes. Jesus tells clearly that there are two kingdoms, and we are to "give" to both.

They were unable to trap Jesus in these words. They were instead silenced by his words. We too can live in peace with this teaching of the two kingdoms from Jesus. This does not mean that Jesus draws a clear line between church and state, and he has nothing to do with the workings of our government. Nor does it mean that since God has created all things, all that we have belongs to our churches. But when Jesus teaches that there are two kingdoms, we learn that God operates in one differently than he does in the other. God is certainly active in this world. We know that he provides

*and protects us in this kingdom as well as giving us eternal life in his heavenly kingdom. But God often hides himself in this kingdom. When evil seems to prevail (and it is not hard to have this idea lately), we might think God has removed himself from this world and has decided to let Satan have his way. But problems arise when we start deciding where God is at work and where he seems to be absent. Debates and disagreements arise when we decide which political party God favors. We set traps for Jesus when we decide how much Jesus should be visible in our schools and public offices. We become God when we decide when God is showing his favor to us and when we doubt his presence. But when we trust that God is still God, we will be amazed and silenced in where and through whom God chooses his will to be done.*

*Our salvation is in Christ alone and because of that we have been freed to live and give freely in this kingdom. Trusting this promise, you can give without fearing that you are giving to the right cause, an organization with the right values, or even a church when you trust that God does in fact work all things for good for those that love him. God has and will use the most unlikely and surprising people and ways to accomplish his will. You are free to give to both kingdoms. You have been trapped by Jesus in this promise. Amen.*