

**Rev. Dr. Craig Howard**  
**“Christ or Caesar”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, October 18, 2020**

**Exodus 33:12-23**

*Moses said to the LORD, ‘See, you have said to me, “Bring up this people”; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, “I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight.” Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.’ He said, ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’ And he said to him, ‘If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.’*

*The LORD said to Moses, ‘I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.’ Moses said, ‘Show me your glory, I pray.’ And he said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, “The LORD”; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But’, he said, ‘you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.’ And the LORD continued, ‘See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.’*

**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.*

The peace of Christ be with you. And also with you. This familiar phrase is packed with meaning. We say it during the passing of the peace. We recognized through this phrase that we have confessed our sins and God has forgiven us. Through this phrase, we acknowledge the reality that God is present in our lives and God's presence means more than mere words. Through this phrase, we are living into the peace that we have received from God. And that peace puts a demand on our lives. It demands that we reach out in peace to others, to our sisters, to our brothers, to our siblings, and to those who are not part of our flock. In our Exodus text, Moses says to God that unless God is present with the people of Israel, they are not special. They are like everyone else. What matters is not that they had jewelry or that they had cattle. It doesn't matter if they enter into the land of Canaan and conquer it as God has promised they would. The most important thing is that God is with them. God is present with them. What matters most today for us here at Kirkwood is that God is present with us. Life will bring challenges and opportunities. Each of us have lived through the hills and valleys. With God's presence with us we have peace in the midst of the storm and even when we go into the valley, even the shadow of death we will not fear because God is present with us. We serve a God who desires relationship with us. Just as Moses wanted to be friends with God, God wants friendship with us.

Being in a relationship with God provides peace that goes beyond understanding. A peace that sometimes doesn't even make sense. So again, I say, "The peace of Christ be with you."

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus and his band of ragtag disciples have left Galilee and are on their way to Jerusalem. Now Jerusalem is the political and social capital of the region where Herod has his palace, and where the temple of the Jews resides. It is where people go to market and buy the ingredients for the seder, or the Sabbath dinner. Jerusalem is this hustling and bustling place of action and activity. And this is where Jesus enters through the gate, riding on a donkey, with people laying down their robes and their clothes, crying, "Hosanna. Hosanna." This is where Jesus goes to the temple. This busy place of action and activity. And he flips the tables upside down. And he runs the money changers out. And he says, "My father's house is a house of prayer. Not a den of thieves." It's obvious that Jesus is a troublemaker. He has not come to bring peace, but a sword. He has not come to create some big kumbaya moment, but to put mother against daughter, and father against son.

And Jesus doesn't care much for the religious leaders either. He isn't impressed with the Pharisees and their long colorful robes. He calls them what they are. Hypocrites. Hypocrites who care more about the outside than the inside - focus is more on the exterior than what's in the heart.

So they put Jesus to the test. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? Of all the questions to ask Jesus, why this one? Why a question about taxes? We must keep in mind that the Jews did not like the emperor. They did not care for the Romans. As far as the Jews were concerned, they were being occupied by the Romans, and were being mistreated. If a Roman soldier said, "Carry my bag," the Jewish person would have to stop what they were doing and carry the bag. There is not equality between the Roman and the Jew. And yet the Jews had to pay an annual tax to the Roman government, or the emperor, in order to continuously be mistreated in this way. Now if Jesus said, "No," then he is committing treason and will be sentenced to death. And if Jesus says, "Yes," well, now he shows that he is a fan of Caesar, and not a true leader of the people.

Now I understand why the people did not feel they should pay taxes in a corrupt system. In the book, *Warmth of Other Suns*, Isabel Wilkerson writes about the black migration from the South to the North that took place between 1910 and 1960. Now, my grandmother and grandfather came to Chicago around 1924 from South Carolina. Now, the book talks about life in the South under Jim Crow; the laws that were created in the South after the Civil War. Now, Jim Crow was a way to maintain slavery without slavery. We are familiar with the separation laws for bathrooms and water fountains. We even know that a black person, during Jim Crow, had to give up their seat on a bus or a streetcar for a white person. But did you know that a black person could not question a white person? The book tells the story about a black man who was almost beaten to death for asking for a receipt from a white man in a grocery store. Another black man was beaten within an inch of his life because he questioned the totals of a ledger of his white sharecropper boss. The boss man said his wife prepared the ledger, and by questioning the ledger, the black man was calling his wife a liar.

Blacks were the majority in the areas of Mississippi and Georgia but were not allowed to vote. And they were required to pay taxes. By the way, even today, although Mississippi has the largest percentage of blacks in their state, a black person hasn't held statewide office in Mississippi for 129 years. Jesus. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? Even today, many people in the United States do not feel they are treated equally by the government. They do not feel the job market is fair. People of color are often the last to be hired and the first to be fired. Women are still struggling for equal pay and equal rights. COVID has made the racial disparities in our nation even more prevalent. Black Americans have been hospitalized or died from COVID-19 at a rate about five times that of white Americans according to the US Center for Disease Control. Should these people continue to pay taxes, continue to pay taxes to a government that they feel is unjust? Do they have the right to protest, to say, "I will not stand up and pledge allegiance to a government that stands against me, that stands on my neck"? Jesus. Is it lawful to pay to the Emperor or not." And Jesus says, "Show me the coin. Whose image is on the coin? Give to the emperor. the themes that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." It's not just what Jesus says that is so powerful. But it's also what Jesus does not say. He said, "Give to the emperor what is required in the emperor's realm." He did not say that the emperor has the same realm as God. Caesar is limited to the coin, but the currency of God is greater. The currency of God buys what the world cannot purchase; love, joy, peace, goodness, kindness, patience. Money can't buy righteousness. Money can't buy salvation. If the choice is between the currency of Caesar or the currency of God, give the emperor what belongs to the emperor and give to God what belongs to God.

What Jesus did say is that the emperor's face is on the coin. But what he did not say is that the emperor is divine. See, this is Jesus speaking in code to the believers of the real God. It was required by Roman law to accept the emperor as divine. By not saying that Caesar is God, Jesus is rejecting the divinity of the Emperor and the national religion. Jesus is saying that a person can believe in God and pay taxes. A person can believe in God and pay allegiance to the state. But don't get it twisted. There is no equivalency. There is no comparison between the emperor and god. There is no equivalency between the flag and the cross. The world can give us things. But Jesus can give us peace. The world can give us power, but Jesus can give us love.

There's a song. It says, "You can have this whole world, but give me Jesus. Give Me Jesus. Give Me Jesus. You can have this whole world, but give me Jesus." Because all that the world has to offer, even this world, even this nation, is nothing compared to what God gave us in this life or in the life to come. Being a friend to this world is nothing compared to being a friend of God and beholding God's glory and God's holiness. "Eye has not seen; ear has not heard. Neither has it entered into the hearts of people what God has prepared for those who love God." And finally, I say, "The peace of Christ be with you." Amen.