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Flourishing 2023

***“Then give Caesar what is his,
and give God what is his.”***
(Matthew 22:21 (The Message))

Lessons from The Gospel According to Matthew

For these past many weeks, we have been guided in worship by the lectionary texts from the Gospel of Matthew. We have been following the narrative of Jesus’ ministry in an increasingly hostile environment among His religious and politically motivated critics.

We recently explored the lessons from Matthew 22:15-22 about efforts to trip up Jesus over allegiances between the Kingdom of God (discipleship) vs. the Roman Empire (civil government). I used the theme of loyalties and obligations to focus on this episode of conflict between Jesus and the religious and civil adversaries. Jesus was/is subversive to a broken/misplaced religious system and civil nationalistic compromise... period.

The church that identifies with faith in the Biblical Jesus will also exist in tension between fidelity to God and civil nationalism (whatever their geography). Too often, as is the point of Matthew’s story, Christians have always been at risk of failing this test of loyalty and obligation when it comes to living out our discipleship to Jesus. Truth is that people have always found justification for their deviation from following Jesus and their impulse to put everything else ahead of God.

Let us pause and reflect on our faith practice as persons and as congregations. I think it’s helpful to be reminded that we believe the biblical assertion that we are created in the image of God in our humanity (Genesis 1:27), and we are being formed into the likeness of Jesus in our spirituality (2 Corinthians 3:18). Is it any wonder, then, that these struggles are real? This should help give clarity to our priorities, values, and behavior. When we truly consider our obligation to God, it just doesn’t compare with any other loyalty, even that of citizenship. Our citizenship should be informed and shaped by our faith in Jesus, not the other way round.

Perhaps this is a good time to be reminded that, as Christians, we should hold separate our allegiances for God and country, rather than conflate them. Christ followers have always lived in this duality of identities: being in this world but not of this world (John 17:15-16). This is challenging and requires the constant renewing of faith to keep properly sorted. Some of the watch words of biblical Christianity are faith, hope, love, trust, forgive, compassion, honor, honesty, generosity, sacrifice, truth, justice, mercy, acceptance, respect, endurance. After all, putting God and others first is not just a slogan, it’s a way of life— a moral/spiritual mandate.

Join with me in celebrating our heritage and our vision as “People of the Chalice.”
LOVE GOD! LOVE PEOPLE!

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