

October 18, 2020

“What Is God’s?”

Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake

Scripture Readings:

1 Thessalonians 1:1-9

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 2 We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers and sisters[a] beloved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. 9 For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God.

Matthew 22:15-21

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 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. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” 21 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.”

Sermon: “What is God’s?”

I woke up Monday morning and asked, “How in the heck am I going to preach the good news on Sunday when the whole world feels this hopeless?” I wrestled with it all week as cases continued to climb at the hospital and as the election gets closer and filled with more vitriol and as tanks still lined the streets less than 40 miles from here.

I think part of the problem is I have a lot to say, plenty to say, but when I stand up here it is not supposed to be about my politics or opinions, my anger or deep sadness. I am called by you to preach the “Gospel” which literally means “The GOOD News”.

I am called to preach about the gospel that stands outside of time and space, that transcends a virus, that transcends politics, that transcends the prejudice that seems to have thrown our country back 50 years.

I am called to find the Good News even through the million different rants running around my head about my deep disappointment and sadness around current events.

But here’s the thing, the gospel may transcend those things but it most certainly speaks to the world we are living in. We have to remain both outside of the world and in it to ease its suffering on behalf of our Creator.

We see Jesus pull that off with skill in this scripture, he avoids the trap set for him by these passive aggressive faith leaders. Can’t you just hear them? “So Teacher, we hear you are sincere and practice impartiality...”

But Jesus sidesteps this potentially treasonous question by asking them “whose face is stamped on this coin?” They answer, “The Emperor’s”. So he says “give to the Emperor what is the emperor’s and to God what is God’s” thus leaving them flummoxed so that he can continue his ministry a little bit longer.

So here we have to ask then, what is God’s? And whose image is stamped on us? God’s, right? We are made in the image of God. So who do we belong to? We belong to God.

Folks, we have a world trying to trap us left and right into falling into that divide; are you with us or against us? Are you a patriot or a socialist? Are you for the police or against them? Do you worship our leaders or are un-American?

This isn’t right, don’t fall into their trap. Because you are God’s and God’s alone. Your opinions should be formed not by the insanity of the latest news cycle, they

are formed by the one that made you and has filled you with a great love of all people, no matter who they are.

This passage has been used throughout our history as a nation to undergird one of our foundational and most precious concepts. Separation of Church and State. It is vital to our ability to practice our faith but it was also meant to protect the rights of people of other faiths or no faith at all.

You don't hear about that very often, you don't hear the "Pharisees of our day" using it to support Muslims, Hindus, or Jews in their rights for religious freedom.

And as we speak, it is being used as a prop for more prejudice, which is the antithesis of how Jesus treated all others. Well except the hypocrites.

He uses that word a lot when dealing with the religious leaders of his own faith. Now we have to always remember that Jesus is not "Christian", he is Jewish and standing within his own faith tradition and holding it accountable for its treatment of others, holding them accountable to their laws which demand that they love their neighbor.

The word hypocrite actually comes from the Greek word for *actor*, someone wearing a mask and pretending to be someone or something they are not. Jesus' faith was informed by so many of our own scriptures that demand that we treat all people with fairness and justice.

He was quick to see these men for what they were. Now do we call out the hypocrites in our faith? Do we see past the facades they wear, claiming Christianity and White Supremacy in the same breath. Do we unmask them when they try to hide their prejudice of so many different things behind the Bible.

I know I don't always, I know I'd like to live in a bubble sometimes where I avoid conflict, avoid rocking the boat, avoid hurting feelings, avoid losing somebody's friendship that I care about. And still care about because I can also see past their mask of hypocrisy.

I can still see the person I know they are when they are separated from their fear that has been manufactured by manipulative forces.

Do I stand up for what is right in the moment or do I continue to try and stay in their lives to show them the love of God and hope that it is a healing force for good. A power that erodes the damage done to them by a political system that has corroded their goodness and co-opted their faith.

It's a hard question to know when to speak out. But remember when you do to address the problem not attack the person. Show them the respect that we all deserve even if you disrespect their ideas or behavior.

But this passage also tells us to give to God what is God's. We can try and stay apolitical but you have to ask yourself, what is God's. Is our planet God's? Is our environment God's? Are the children separated from their families God's?

Is my coworker and friend of color who lives in Waukesha who walks out his front door to tanks on his street, who is not free from harassment or worse, in his own neighborhood, is he God's? Is my Jewish friend whose synagogue has been vandalized, is she God's? Are the transgender people being murdered in unprecedented numbers, are they God's? Am I God's?

You get my point, hard as we may try to stand outside of politics, holding onto our faith, the separation of church and state breaks down very quickly when the state is hurting what is God's.

It's a hard question to know when to speak out. But remember when you do to address the problem not attack the person. Show them the respect that we all deserve even if you disrespect their ideas or behavior.

So the Gospel of Matthew leaves us with this problem and Paul presents us with a solution, Paul, God bless him, HE give us the Good news today even if I'm having trouble finding it.

I didn't know until my first New Testament class that this Pauline letter to the Thessalonians was the first thing written in our new testament. I think because the Gospels are about Jesus. I had it in my mind that they were first, but this letter predates all the Gospels by at least 20 years.

First, I want to say that when I read this through again for the first time in a while this first part reminded me so much of you all. Grace to you and peace. We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers.

Even in my visits to our homebound members. You take praying for each other very seriously and you show gratitude for each other constantly. And are grace filled and some of the most peaceful people I have encountered, even in the midst of your troubles.

Paul is writing this letter to a fledgling Christian community that is struggling to claim the gospel in the midst of the Roman Empire.

One commentary summarized the struggles they were going through "The Christians in Thessalonica were being persecuted. Property was being seized. Workers were stopped from practicing their trades. Those who found the new faith were shunned by their families. Some were insulted, some beaten, and some put to death."

Yet they clung to their new found faith, they did works of love and had steadfast hope and did not return to the worship of idols. And they did this by being imitators of Christ. Showing love and welcome to all in spite of the risk. Paul wrote “you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.

This is how they coped with their struggles. They became imitators of Christ, they showed love to each other and to those they welcomed into their community. And they had joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.

So if they can do that, if they can have joy by imitating Christ and changing the lives of those around them, than so can we. If they could have joy living in the fear of death and persecution we can certainly do it in the midst of this pandemic, even in political and social maelstroms, even in isolation we can continue to imitate Christ.

Continue to show the world, whose image is stamped upon us. It is not Biden’s, or Trump’s, or any other person, it is not a dollar sign, or an American flag or a company logo, or a sports team’s. It is God’s image that we bear.

David Lose wrote this about what it means to live in a faithful community. “We call each other back to God’s word and promise and charge that we are made in God’s own image and likeness and are therefore called to live in a way that others may detect the family resemblance”.

So when someone tries to draw you into a trap that is set to divide us, claim whose you are, tell them unequivocally that you don’t belong to anyone but God. Show everyone what being the Lord’s looks like.

That it means you are decent, that you do not hate anyone, that you do not make fun of people who are worse off than you, that you do not bully, that you have empathy and consideration for others. That you listen and respond to the pain of others, show them with your lives every chance you get what love looks like when it is lived out every single day, not just for show for an hour on Sunday morning.

When you get up in the morning look in the mirror and say “I AM GODS”! The Lord has my loyalty and my life. Ask God to make use of you, Ask God to take your fears, burdens and troubles and put you to work in any way possible in your circumstances and let us imitate Christ in all that we do. AMEN

Call to Worship

In our ability to see everyone equally as children of God

Let us be imitators of Christ

In our efforts to not be drawn into choosing sides in battles full of hate, let us only choose love.

Let us be imitators of Christ

When we get low, and discouraged, let us find our hope in you.

Let us be imitators of Christ

Invocation

Loving God who does not choose sides, who does not fall into human made traps help us to imitate the love, equity, and compassion of Jesus Christ. Show us the way of hope and enliven us with your spirit even in the midst of our hardships. Be with us now and strengthen our resolve to serve you in gratitude and grace.

AMEN

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- REV. SUSAN DRAKE

