

Pentecost 20, 10.18.2020

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Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96:1-9; Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

“Giving Back to God”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.* Good morning. Thank you for joining us in person and online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church!

It is pretty remarkable that Christianity flourished during the Roman Empire. Everything was against its survival. Christianity was a small minority religious group, Christians were persecuted, and yet the church grew. The Bible, doctrine and theology as we know them did not yet fully exist; rather, the church grew because of the witness of its members.

What would you do if you didn’t have a Bible translated into your own language? How would you witness to your faith without a written Bible to point to? Paul helps us see the importance of being an imitator of Christ in today’s second reading. Paul writes, *“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, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 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.”*

Paul told them that in spite of persecution, they had shared the good news by imitating Christ. They shared the message of Jesus by example, so that Paul had nothing he could even add to their witness to Christ. Christianity grew not because of the power and support of an emperor or a leader, but because of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individual Christians.

There is something to learn here. Long before the support of an empire, a state church, or even something called “Christian culture,” Christianity grew because individual Christians - everyday people - embodied the message of the Good News. This leads us to a question: What if you were the only Bible anyone ever read?

Christianity and the church lives or falls by our example of faith. We can hold up the Bible all we want, we can quote scripture all day long, but if our lives do not show - through example - the good news, then we are not imitators of Christ. Does our faith shine through in all we do? Does our faith form the moral compass of our lives over a lifetime? Each of us may be the only Bible someone will ever read.

Paul writes, *“but in every place your faith has become known, so that we have no need to speak of it.”* The Thessalonians did such a good job of living the gospel message, that Paul had nothing to

add to their witness. This should make us pause and ask ourselves, “Is my life an example of Jesus Christ and the gospel message?” Nothing, not even persecution, could stop them from living for others and imitating Christ. They were single minded in their purpose for life: to be living examples of the gospel.

We share a common humanity with the Thessalonians. I am sure they laughed and cried. They probably had hobbies or interests that they pursued. They enjoyed friendships in their community with people who were different from them – because sharing in the joys and sorrows of people, as Christ among them, is how the church grows. Though we are separated from them by two millennia, their humanity, worries and hopes were probably very similar to ours. In Mark’s gospel (8:37), Jesus asks his followers and us, “*For what can a person give in return for their life?*” Jesus challenges us to see that our lives and lifetimes should be a giving back to God for all of God’s gifts to us: our selves, our time, and our possessions.

In today’s gospel, Jesus was asked a question that was meant to entrap him. The Pharisees lived strictly by the Law of Moses, while the Herodians were Jewish supporters of King Herod and of Roman rule. Normally these two groups didn’t have much in common, but their desire to have Jesus arrested brought them together. They hoped to force Jesus into saying that people were under no obligation to pay their tax to the Roman emperor.

So they asked Jesus, “*Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?*” The question is a good one because if Jesus answered, “No, it isn’t lawful to pay the taxes,” he probably would have been arrested for sedition or even treason. If he said “yes,” the religious leaders would have attacked Jesus for being a supporter of Roman rule rather than Jewish law.

So Jesus answered them saying, “*Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.*” Show me the money. “*And they showed him a denarius.*” What implicated them was that they produced a coin that they should not have even had on their persons. The Roman denarius wasn’t allowed in the temple, or to be used in the temple for offerings. Temple officials and moneychangers profited from exchanging the Roman denarius into the Hebrew shekel at the temple gate. Jesus called them “hypocrites,” because though the Pharisees and Herodians were Jewish, possession of the coin revealed that they benefited from the financial life of Roman society.

So when they told Jesus that the coin contained the image and title of Caesar the emperor, Jesus said, “*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that*

*are God's.*” Jesus’ answer is amazing for its honesty about human participation in both society and in the life of faith. Payment of tax is a recognition of the benefits one receives from society. Jesus recognized that we live with a foot in this world and a foot in God’s kingdom.

However, Jesus also added that we are to give “*to God the things that are God's.*” The word translated as “give” is “apodote” (ἀπόδοτε), which literally means “to give *back*.” This is quite different than the verb “to give,” as in to give payment for goods and services. The verb Jesus used means to “give back,” as in to repay someone a debt. Jesus means that we have received something from God – we have received our very lives. Our lives are a gift from God, and how we “live for and give back” to God is a profound recognition that we owe God a lot. We owe God our very lives.

By saying, “give back to God,” Jesus is asking us what we can give in return for our lives. Our selves, our time, and our possessions would not exist if it not for the Creator God, who has placed life and time before each of us. Our lives are the one thing we cannot create. We can decide what we do with our selves, our time, and our possessions, but we cannot create our own lives. Jesus is asking us to simply recognize that what we “give back” God is a profound recognition that the ability to hold anything in our hands at all is God’s greatest gift to us.

Today Jesus and Paul are reminding us of the “big issues” of our lives. Paul asks us to be living examples of Christ for others, and Jesus us asks us to give as if everything we have depended upon God. We are to be an example of Christ for others, and give back to God.

Jesus challenges us to ask, “What is the center of my life and what am I living for? Is my life an example of “living for Christ” and “giving back to God?” Those are the only two questions that really matter. All the rest is about working out the details of our lives. The details of life are important: how we use our selves, our time and our possessions to give back to God. However, it doesn’t matter if we live in a time of peace, a time of war, or a time of pandemic, the “big issues” of living for Christ and giving back to God never change; rather, they give focus to everything else.

The theme of our Stewardship appeal this year is “*In Everything Give Thanks.*” Giving back to God is about giving thanks for the gift of life that makes our lives, and the details of life, possible. It amazes me that we still remember the Thessalonians and their example of living for Christ. As they were persecuted and tested for their faith, we too, are being tested as a society and a world. Does our faith focus everything “to live for Christ and to give back to God?”

Will we be remembered like the Thessalonians? How do you wish to be remembered for your life? Paul and Jesus offer us some profound guidance: Be an example of Christ for others, and give

back to God for your life. Live with thanksgiving and gratitude so that others in both society and the church will know the warmth and freedom that new life in Christ gives.

By giving back to God – our selves, our time and our possessions – we become examples of Christ for others. How do you wish to be remembered? How can you live for Christ and to give back to God? Amen.