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Isaiah 45:1-7, Psalm 96, Matthew 22:15-22

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And they brought him a coin. ²⁰And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” ²¹They said, “Caesar’s.”

We live in both the Church and the State, and the Bible has convictions about both. I was rather struck by the ending of last Sunday’s parable of the wedding feast. Perhaps you were too. It is a parable about life in the Church. The king who hosts the wedding feast is determined that there shall be guests at his feast. Those he first invited declined to attend and in great wickedness mistreated the king’s servants and even slew some of them. After destroying those wicked people, the king commands that his servants should go into the highways and byways and bid people to come to the wedding. And they do so, gathering “both bad and good.”

⁹Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. ¹⁰So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests. (Matthew 22:9-10, KJV)

The evangelism overtones of this parable are hard to miss. Jesus wants people in his church — all of them! Jesus is lonely till all come to him. So, anyone in the highways and byways of life is welcome to Christ. And that is good. That means there is room for you and me, however well or badly we might have been wandering the highways and byways of life so far.

But then there was the strange ending to that story. It concerned one guest who was found to be without the wedding garment. The garment was available, but the man simply did not wear it. Perhaps he assumed that his own clothes were fine and dandy and that he need not conform himself to the ways of the wedding.

In my opinion, the highest meaning of the wedding garment is Christ himself. To be a Christian, it is fitting for us to be found “in Christ.” To be a member of that community—the Church—means that our daily garment is to be Christ. When we wake up in the morning, we are rub the sleep from our eyes, stretch our old bones, and put on Christ. And then we are to go out into the day, doing what we can that day to resemble him.

This is a solemn matter. The Church is a community with its own spirit and standards, and a Christian should try to honor that, both to avoid being cast out and for the chance to turn toward a righteous life. To be a Christian means that we meant for the wedding garment. We are meant to be found in Christ, all the livelong day.

Now, in this morning’s readings, we are reminded that the Christian lives in two cities. We live in both the Church and in the State. And let us notice the goodwill the Bible often bears toward the state.

Let me begin with this morning’s Psalm – Psalm 96. It is hard to imagine a greater contrast than that between the joy and piety of this Psalm and a strange Associated Press article I read earlier this week. I mean to get to that in a minute.

First, the Psalm. Psalm 96 is ecstatic, calling upon all the world to adore the LORD. As I read aloud a few lines of the Psalm, do not imagine these appeals to be cold commands toward piety. No, think of some seasoned Christian you admire, say, dear old Pastor Charles Trexler of blessed memory, or dear old Pastor Raymond Shaheen, also of blessed memory. Think of such seasoned Christians passing on to us what life has taught them and of how dear the Lord has become for them. And so, think of a gentle voice of experience. The voice may tremble, but it trembles with awe:

PSALM 96

- ¹ Sing to the LORD | a new song;*
sing to the LORD, all | the whole earth.
- ² Sing to the LORD and | bless his name;*
proclaim the good news of his salvation from | day to day.
- ⁶ Oh, the majesty and magnificence | of his presence!*
- Oh, the power and the splendor of his | sanctuary!
- ⁷ Ascribe to the LORD, you families | of the peoples;*
- ascribe to the LORD hon- | or and power.
- ⁹ Worship the Lord in the beau- | ty of holiness;*
- let the whole earth trem- | ble before him.

Not only is this an ecstatic cry from the heart of the believer, but also it is an audacious cry! For Israel knew that her neighbors worshiped other gods – Ba’al, Marduk, Re, Isis and so on. But in his enthusiasm for Israel’s God, the Psalmist rushes right on by those gods and invites the whole earth to sing a new song to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Meanwhile, there is the contrasting piety of the Nebraska legislator I read about in the AP story. The story starts out with this heading:

Suit against God thrown out over lack of address

By NATE JENKINS, Associated Press Writer

A judge has thrown out a Nebraska legislator’s lawsuit against God, saying the Almighty wasn’t properly served due to his unlisted home address. State Sen. Ernie Chambers filed the lawsuit last year seeking a permanent injunction against God.¹

It seems that the State Senator felt that God was being mean and that the court ought to compel Him to stop it. Glad to say, the lawsuit failed because the Court could not figure out God’s address.

What has happened to Nebraska!?! That’s supposed to be good Lutheran territory. Lutherans ought to know that the Bible does not speak so casually concerning God, but with devotion and honor and joy, and invites the whole world to do the same – including those people who do not yet know the Lord.

¹ http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20081015/ap_on_fe_st/suing_god_2

Next, consider our First Lesson. I bet the people who heard the preaching of Isaiah in this 45th Chapter of his book must have been flabbergasted by it and perhaps dismayed. But what can Isaiah do? He is a prophet. He does not speak for himself, but for God, and it is the mysterious will of God to befriend Cyrus—an enemy king! Cyrus is the emperor of Persia—modern Iran. He is a conqueror. He is master of much of the world, and he is a pagan. He does not know the God of Israel, but the God of Israel knows *him* and loves him. Indeed, through his prophet Isaiah, the LORD promises victory and dominion to Cyrus. He does it for the sake of Israel, but what he does is to provide victory to Cyrus. And so it is that the Bible shows affection and respect for secular, even pagan and foreign rulers, and so for their people.

And now, ponder this morning's Gospel Lesson about the tax paid to Caesar. I think the trick is to take with increasing seriousness both sides of our Lord's teaching:

Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.(Matthew 22:21, KJV)

There were devout Jews back in those days who would not even look at a silver denarius, let alone hold one, for that coin bore the image of Tiberius Caesar. For both religious and nationalistic reasons, they felt that coin to be foul. And so, *some* devout Jews refused to look at or hold that coin. But not these particular devout Jews. Jesus doesn't possess such a coin, but they do, and they give it to him when he asks for the coin.

Notice that Jesus does not hesitate to hold the foreign coin. And why should he? Without Christ was nothing made that was made (John 1:3), including Tiberius Caesar. Jesus holding that coin is akin to Jesus holding the little children in that passage so important to us, when Jesus says to his disciples:

Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. ¹⁵Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them.(Mark 10:14-16, KJV)

Dear old Tiberius Caesar off in Rome is in fact upheld by Jesus in his everlasting arms. He too belongs to Christ, and it was for his sake too that Christ died on the Cross. So, render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's. Do not count even a far-off secular government as somehow being alien to us. As far as lies possible with us, be subject unto secular authorities. It is true that in the end, we must obey God, not men, yet to the degree that we can obey those with legal authority over us, let us do so, for they too belong to our God.

Over the years and to this present time, I have known people in this congregation who have displayed extraordinary peace and calmness in face of troubles. They, like each of us, live in two cities – the Church and the State – and I do believe that, God bless them, they have permitted their citizenship in the Church to help them weather the chaos they have experienced in the State.

What State? Well, I mean the larger world, with its own ways and rules, slings and arrows, regularities and unpredictabilities. I mean the wild worlds of finance, medicine, romance, law, politics, taxes, conflicts, even terrorism. We live enmeshed in faith, but

also in puzzling and sometimes indifferent forces. But you can do this — you can let your life in Christ support you in your life in the State.

I still marvel at the story Carol told me about the staff person at the Wartburg who died earlier this year. She was a nurse, I believe, or a nursing aid. She was not old, maybe in her fifties, and she was not in ill health as far as she knew. But one morning she came to work, suddenly felt ill, said to her colleagues, “Pray for me, my sisters, I think I am dying.” And she did. She collapsed and that day she died. She was surrounded by medical resources, but when she felt she was dying, her instinct was to cry to God, not just to the doctors, but even more fundamentally to the God of the doctors.

They brought him – our Lord Jesus – a coin, and he asked them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” And they said, “Caesar’s.” And he said unto them, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s.” For even Caesar, and all this wild, blooming, confusing world, belong to God, and for your sake, he is going to make all things work together for your good, through the holy sacrifice, the labors, and the grace of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.