

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel Vélez Rivera  
Readings: Isaiah 45:1-7, Psalm, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, Matthew 22:15-22

In a few chapters earlier in Matthew's gospel Jesus says: "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." In today's lesson Jesus tells the religious leaders, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Both statements might have put the listeners at a crossroads regarding one's civic responsibilities and one's Christian commitment. The phrases might be interpreted to mean that one must choose between following the laws of God and the laws of the world, but is that what Jesus meant? The Pharisees and Herodians (followers of Herod) to whom Jesus spoke in today's gospel intended to trap him once again with their line of inquiry. They felt that he was a threat to the emperor because of the influence he wielded on the people and the faith that the people put in the Lord instead of the emperor. And so, when they tried pinning him down with their veiled inquiry, he answered their question with a question as he showed them a coin with the image of Caesar, saying, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

These leaders had financial, political, and religious influence over many people in Israel. Some were faithfully aligned with the Roman Empire, some had nationalist inclinations and wanted Israel to be governed by loyal Jews, and as is always the case there were those who didn't belong to one side or the other. Truth be told, their political and religious values were as diverse as we see today among faithful people of all religions. But while these religious leaders may have disagreed on many things, there was one important matter that brought them together, their opposition to Jesus. They didn't recognize him as their Messiah or anyone else's. On the contrary, they continued putting him to the test - whenever, however, and wherever they could.

They were threatened by the son of a carpenter who influenced more and more people in the community each time he went out into the streets. The gospels tell us that this authority that they so envied, hated and were threatened by was because the man in question was God, and because he had a clear message for all people, starting with the great commandment, a commandment of love. What the Bible does not tell us was what perhaps what the leaders themselves may not have known, and that is that Christ's grace and salvation isn't completely free, it requires our commitment to love and serve the Lord in return.

Jesus wasn't with one band or the other, or anywhere in between - he rebelled against the injustices and rigidity of both civil and religious laws. So, he was in the God band, what Presiding Bishop Michael Curry calls the Jesus Movement! As I said earlier, Jesus taught the people about infinite love and compassion with one condition, that they love and serve the Lord God, and one's neighbors as oneself with passion and commitment. Christ's message continues

to remind us of our accountability to God and country. You see, for Jesus it isn't an either or, God or the world, but a both/and. God and the world.

I've had conversations with some of you about priorities and commitment, not so much about the priorities and commitments of those who are faithful to our faith and to our church community, but of those who don't yet know that St. Gabriel's will be their church home someday. Something that keeps coming up is how to let the people know about the love of Christ and about our community of faith. What will help others see the importance of having a loving faith community the way you have come to know it? How do we help others realize the importance of balancing our secular and spiritual lives? The question that all disciples and evangelizers of Christ should ask themselves at one time or another is how to reach people and help them learn to make Christ as much a priority as the other important aspects of one's life. It's not an easy task, but when I think of the twenty-eight St. Gabrielites that helped serve food at the Community Table last week, or how the seven volunteers that teach children how to read and write in Spanish and adults English every Friday, or when I remember the image of our kids proudly processing down the center aisle of the National Cathedral with torches, processional crosses, and the Virgen de Guadalupe two weeks ago, I realize that we are doing a great job of making God our priority and making ourselves known to others as a faithful congregation. But we must do more, we always must do more to continue having God on the top of the list and helping others do the same.

Our priorities change according to our circumstances in life. We heard how some of the people of Israel changed, how their values and priorities changed with the onset of Roman influence in their society. They became more committed to government and ordinary leaders than they were to their Maker. Jesus realized that political and financial power had become their substitute god. And so, when he talked to them about priorities he made it clear to, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Balance. Priorities. Both/and not either or.

Balance and priorities doesn't mean that we should feel guilty or badly as we spend time on our hobbies or interests, or when we support our children in their softball or soccer games, or music and drama programs. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't continue to work hard at our jobs or take vacation time to reenergize and reconnect with our families and friends. What it means is that we cannot ever forget that our Lord must continue to be our highest priority, and that we must continue to live in the world.

It is from this perspective that Saint Paul, in his letter to the Thessalonians, commends the faithful about the authenticity and commitment to their faith, not overlooking the temporal things that were also important. Jesus and Paul both remind us that we are of this world, and citizens of God's kingdom. In some of his other letters, Paul affirms the need for balance at the crossroads of life, which is pretty much my interpretation of what Jesus told the religious leaders of Israel.

The people of Thessalonica became Christian models to so many other communities. They were able to stay firm in their faith and to persevere, despite all the persecution that they suffered. Many in that community kept their feet on the ground and their eyes on Christ, in the same way that so many people of faith do today.

The testimony of the Thessalonians in the early days of Christianity continues to be valid for us today. I pray that we will follow that early Christian community's way of life as we follow Christ and make him our priority with balance. I pray that through our actions, our presence, and our prayers, our neighbors will learn from each of us how the spirit of God moves among us at Saint Gabriel's. May we continue showing the world how our God and our lives are balanced priorities. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Amen.