The Twenty-third Sunday after Trinity
St. Matthew 22:15-22
8 November, Anno Domini 2026

Children of God,

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Pharisees and Herodians were certainly strange bedfellows. But, then again, as they say "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." The Pharisees hated Jesus because they taught a righteousness of the Law, a righteousness earned by following not only the commandments but also all the traditions of the elders. They despised that Jesus came preaching the true righteousness, the righteousness of faith in the long-promised Messiah. They wanted Jesus dead but their Roman overlords would not allow them to carry out the death penalty. But Jesus wasn't an enemy of the Romans. He posed them no threat so they really had no interest in Him.

But the Romans were enemies of the Jews. They were usurpers illegitimately ruling over God's people. Never mind that it was the Jews' idolatry, their rejection of God's rule over them, that had gotten them exiled from the Promised Land multiple times and, finally, landed them under the Romans' control. But the Romans were the only one's who could eliminate Jesus' threat to the Jews. So the Pharisees, always the good hypocrites, cozied up to the pagan Romans and suddenly pretended to be interested in protecting the Emperor and empire. Liars. Do you recall how hated tax collectors were in Jewish society - those turn-coat Jews who were enriching themselves while squeezing extra taxes from their own for the pagan Roman Emperor?

The Jews' only hope was to convince the Romans that Jesus was an enemy of the state, that He was trying to start a revolt to overthrow the Romans and drive them out of Judea. This is why Pilate's questions all revolved around Jesus being a king. This is why the Jews charged Pilate with not being a friend of Caesar. And the Jews will even claim the exact opposite of what happened during the encounter before us today. In his account of our Lord's Passion, St. Luke records these words from the Jews to Pilate "We found this

man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king." (Lk. 23:2) None of which was true, of course. But all that mattered to the Jews was that Jesus die.

Jesus would have none of it. How foolish of the Jews to try to pit God against His own Law. The same God who commanded that we are to have no other gods and offer the tithe to Him in faith also commanded that we are to honor and obey those whom He has placed in authority over us. There is no contradiction unless you are an idolater seeking to disobey God. And thus the Pharisees were left with egg on their faces because it was they in fact who neither gave to God the things that were God's nor to Caesar the things that were Caesar's. They denied the word of God, they denied His Christ, and they would have gladly refused to pay taxes if they could get away with it.

How well do we give to God the things that belong to Him? Do you fear His wrath against your doubt and covetousness and idolatry or do you fear the wrath of man and the persecution of those who hate God or missing out on worldly things and pleasures? Do you give the Lord all glory for your life and salvation or do you seek some of that glory for yourself, boasting in your accomplishments and finding peace in your own righteousness? Do you gladly give to the Lord of your first fruits or anxiously give Him of the left-overs? Do you believe all that God has spoken in Holy Scripture even when the wise and powerful of the world and your own reason tell you otherwise or presume to change the Word of God to something more reasonable, something that demands less of you? Do you fully trust the forgiveness of Christ's absolution or do you doubt that He means what He says through the mouths of His servants?

We know the truth and it stings to have to admit it. We have certainly withheld from God all that rightly belongs to Him - our trust, our faith, and our obedience. Indeed, EVERYTHING belongs to God - Caesar, his coin, the Pharisees and Herodians, the cattle on a thousand hills, everything you have, and you yourself. Thus to render to God what is His is to use everything you have been given according to His Word - not for your own purposes but His, to carry out the duties and responsibilities of your various vocations. Is it any wonder then, that we struggle to know and give to Caesar the things that belong to him when we struggle to render to God all that belongs to Him? Is it

any wonder that we don't understand where Caesar's claim upon us starts and stops? We too, like good hypocrites, have sought to pit the two against one another, acting as though we can't possibly figure out how to honor both God and Caesar or our boss or our family. And let us not forget that the caesar's were pagans who often sought to deify themselves. Indeed, the coin handed to Jesus was inscribed with Tiberius Caesar's image and the coin read "Son of God". We can neither withhold our honor and taxes from the government because it is filled with wickedness, nor can we turn aside from the things of God because the government so says it.

You are the baptized. In your Baptism the likeness of God, lost at the transgression of your first parents, was restored to you. You - everything about you - belongs to Him. He has inscribed His Name upon you and written your name in the Book of Life. You are the redeemed of the Lord. You are a child of God. You have been cleansed of all your sin and drawn up out of death and judgment. You are no longer under the dominion of Satan. You owe neither him nor his minions your allegiance or fear or obedience. You are free to give honor to Caesar, to pay your taxes, to pray for those in authority whether you agree with them or not, to serve and obey them. Only when they step out of their God-given authority and demand from you those things that belong to God and seek to withhold from you those things that God has given to you for your salvation are you free to disobey them. Then you must obey God rather than men and entrust your life to the Lord.

Children of God, I don't need to tell you that the persecution of Christ and His Church is rising in our midst. Christians are being arrested in some places for gathering as our Lord bids us. Others are being threatened by those who would presume to the Church what it can and cannot preach. Still others are being persecuted to the point of martyrdom because they dare to confess the Name of Christ. Do not be afraid. Those who hate Christ have always sought to silence Him and confuse His children into obedience with lies and false teachings. Do not be deceived. Do not fall into their cleverly devised traps. Be rooted in the Word that you may test every spirit, including your own, so that you are not led astray. Your Lord will remain faithful to you in life, in hardship, in prison, and even in death. You belong to Him.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and minds through faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord.