

“Kingdom Loyalties”  
Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle  
Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – October 16, 2011  
Text: Matthew 22:15-22

As many of you know, one of my pet peeves is how the word “Christian” has come to be used more and more as an adjective rather than a noun – as in “Christian” music, “Christian” radio and TV stations, “Christian” novels, “Christian” businesses, and the like – and especially now as we are in this primary election season, “Christian” voters. The word “Christian” is treated as if it identified a special interest group, or a marketing niche, or a voting block – to be appeased, or accommodated, or sold to. It isn’t that there aren’t such markets or interest groups, even voting blocks – but it has less to do with Christianity than pandering to particular tastes or political opinions.

I love the story that Bill Carter tells about orientation during his first day at Princeton Seminary. The last speaker in one of the session was the dean of the seminary. He said two things to the entering class that Bill says he’s never forgotten. The first thing he said was, “If you’re wondering what you’re doing here, at a theological seminary, don’t worry. In a couple of weeks, you will be wondering what some of your classmates are doing here.” They all laughed, he said, and he was right.

The second thing the dean said was far more profound. He said, “You may be thinking that you have come to a Christian school, but I am here to tell you that this seminary is not a Christian school.” After almost falling out of their chairs, the dean continued, “This seminary is not a Christian school. The best we can ever aspire to become is a school full of Christians.”

The word “Christian” is a much better noun than it is an adjective. To use it as a modifier would indicate that there is and maybe can be only one Christian position on a

given political, social, or moral issue. Some would have us think so – and many in the media, in politics, not to mention the church – apparently believe it to be so. That would certainly make things a lot simpler than they are, in fact.

When Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees and the Herodians, two parties of Judaism that would have been opposed to each other, but united in wanting Jesus out of the way – they tried to trap him into taking a position regarding the payment of taxes to the Romans who occupied Palestine at the time. The Pharisees opposed or at least resented paying taxes to Ceasar, regarding it as a defilement of the purity of their faith. The Herodians, Jews who were loyal to the family of Herod, the Jewish puppet installed by the Romans, would love to have reported to the Roman authorities that Jesus was promoting mutiny among the masses. Together they asked him, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” In a stroke of divine genius Jesus instead asked them a question. He asked to see one of the coins that was used to pay the tax to Ceasar. They showed it to him and he asked whose image was on the coin. Ceasar’s of course. So he said to them, “Then give to Ceasar what is Ceasar’s and give to God what belongs to God.”

Believe it or not, Jesus wasn’t laying out a theological basis for what much later came to be known in this country as the separation between church and state, which is a good idea for other reasons. As a Jew, Jesus would never have made a distinction between what is “sacred” and what is “secular.” He would have affirmed the words of Psalm 24 that “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” All people, all things belong to the Creator of the universe. But in the created order of things God entrusts earthly rulers with responsibilities to govern societies in such a way as to maintain order and promote the common good. Do they sometimes overstep their bounds? Of course they do.

So Jesus avoids the trap his questioners try to set for him, but he wasn’t merely being clever. Actually he only points to the dilemma that his followers have always faced,

because he still leads with questions. What belongs to whom? What belongs to God and what belongs to the rulers and the powers of this present age? What kind of allegiance do we owe to the lords of this place, this time, this nation, that will not violate our reverence for and obedience to the eternal God? It's not enough to ask "What would Jesus do?" The question is "What would Jesus have us do?" For so many of the questions that plague and perplex us, both private and public, there is no single "Christian" response. There are only Christians trying to make them. The primary question for us is, to whom do we belong? There's no predetermined script.

That's not to say there isn't guidance and help for us as we try to sort out our loyalties and the commitment of our efforts and resources while living as Christians in this world. When Jesus first arrived on the public scene, following his baptism and temptation in the wilderness, he returns to his home town of Nazareth and begins to preach the message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Later in Matthew's gospel Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Throughout the gospel this is what he proclaims. It is his passion, the primary reason of his life – God's coming kingdom.

For most Americans the kingdom of God is a vague concept. We don't live under a king or queen. But in the ancient world (and many places still today) it was not ambiguous. It meant the absolute rule of a monarch – the king, Ceasar, called the shots. Jesus taught his disciples to pray for a new order of life, where God ruled. We pray for what the world would look like if God's will were done, without the illusion that we can bring it about on our own. Nonetheless, the kingdom of God is not just about the future. In Luke's gospel Jesus proclaims that "The kingdom of God has come near," and "The kingdom of God is among you." When we pray the prayer of our Lord we are asking God to let us play a part in advancing God's kingdom.

This is World Food Day, and later today many of us will be joining in the CROP Walk to raise funds for world hunger, and for hunger relief efforts here in our community. If God's will were done on earth as it is in heaven would 16,000 children each day die from hunger-related causes – one every five seconds? In a little less than two years, would the number of people who live in poverty have increased by 100 million and the number of people who are hungry by more than 75 million? If God's will were done on earth as it is in heaven, would over 37 million Americans be living in poverty (2007), about 12.5 percent of the population? (Most poor families are working families, but low wages are not enough to cover the cost of housing, medical care, child care, transportation, clothing and food.) *(Statistics from Church World Service publication, "Facts Have Faces.")*

For Christians the relation of faith to civil authority (what belongs to Ceasar and what belongs to God) is to be seen in light of the resurrection of Jesus and the coming kingdom of God. It has to do with all areas of life – private, communal and public. The ministry of the church and the call of Christians to play our part in God's advancing kingdom takes us beyond just caring for one another so we can cope with the pressures and blows of life, but to act in such a way that every area of the world's life is seen in terms of Christ's rule. In a passage from the book by Pastor Martin Thielen that some of us have been reading together – "What's the Least I Can Believe and Still be a Christian" – he says this:

*In chapter 65 Isaiah says, "Never again will there be in (the land) an infant who lives but a few days." In God's kingdom, infant mortality does not exist. Therefore issues like health insurance and prenatal care are kingdom issues. Isaiah then says, "Never again will there be . . . an old man who does not live out his years." In God's kingdom, senior adults live long, productive, and healthy lives. Therefore issues like Medicare and Social Security are kingdom issues. Isaiah adds, "They will build houses and dwell in*

*them.” In God’s kingdom, every person lives in a decent house. Therefore issues like fair mortgage rates and affordable housing are kingdom issues. Isaiah continues, “They will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.” In God’s kingdom, food is plentiful. Therefore, healthy, accessible, and affordable food is a kingdom issue. Isaiah goes on to say, “They will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain.” In God’s kingdom, people are fairly compensated for their work. Therefore, issues like minimum wage and employee benefits are kingdom issues. Then Isaiah says, “They will not . . . bear children doomed to misfortune.” In God’s kingdom, children thrive. Therefore, issues like child nutrition and early education are kingdom issues. Finally, Isaiah dreams of the day when “the wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox . . . They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain.” In God’s kingdom, violence and warfare are contraband. Therefore, peacemaking between peoples and nations is a major kingdom issue.*

As Christians, we may not agree on the best approaches to attack these issues, let alone resolve them. The clarity of the call is matched by the complexity of the issues themselves. But the kingdom of God must be our guiding vision. May God give us eyes to see signs of the kingdom in our midst, hearts to seek the kingdom way, and courage to follow it. May God’s kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven.