

Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost: Matthew 22:15-22

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About this time of year, my Grandma Mary always swapped out her table settings. The green water glasses and plain flatware stayed the same, her blue willow dishes still came out when company came over, but still, there were changes. Most notably, she'd shift from the floppy, mid-century white plastic to the more honest and sturdy cork-backed placemats. She had a mixed set, which always made it fun to grab your seat before anyone else. You got to choose which image to appreciate. They were all of a certain era, American Primitive, with square farmhouses, apple trees evenly spaced dotting hillsides, the occasional critter with unreal but recognizable facial features. My favorite was Edward Hicks's "Peaceable Kingdom." I never knew this, but apparently the "Peaceable Kingdom" I grew up loving, with its zoo-like cluster of animals, was only one of many. Hicks painted around 100 different versions, always with a lesson, always with animals, sometimes with banner-bearing Quakers. But they all unmistakably made a claim. That the world as we know it is not as it should be, and one day it will be different, one day.

More often than not, you'll hear me use the term "Kingdom of God" instead of "Peaceable Kingdom," but the idea's the same as what Hicks tried to capture over and over again. We try, like that early American painter to get it right, to name it right, but we always fall a little short, forget a detail, or see the world change enough for the clarity of our image to change, too. But the main idea is that the Kingdom of God stakes its claim on us. It paints the world as its ideal. We see what's different compared to how the world is, and it's up to us, with God's help, to move how the world is a little closer to how it should be. That's our job as Christians. Simple enough. Except, maybe we don't actually know what that "should be" looks like. If Hicks has the right of it, we'll need to figure out how to get lambs to lay still next to lions, lions that are not actively drooling over their cuddly snack. But it's more than that. A lot more. Problem is, the Bible and Christian History don't give us a single, easy definition. Nearly every branch of theology says something different about that Kingdom, what it's for, and when it'll show up. To give you just a hint of how complex this is, I've gathered a handful of descriptors of the Kingdom of God from the Bible. You ready? Here goes.

The Kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, joy, and mutual upbuilding with Jesus at its throne. So far, so good? There's more. A lot more. The Kingdom of God is bold. It's for the poor, for the persecuted, for the meek. It is over all things. It is not yet, but it's in the midst of you. It is not of this world, but it is on earth and in heaven. It is at hand, it's coming any minute, but it's not coming until the end of the age. In it, there are no tears, no death, no mourning, no pain. It's all about Jesus, but it's also the Law and the Prophets. It's a banquet, a feast, a courtroom. It is justice and good news. It is compared to investments, a mustard seed, a gardener, a net. It's hard to get into if you're tied too much to earthly things. It's filled with grace, it is equitable, and it evokes reverence and awe. It is ours to bring about, and it is God's to bring about. And we are its citizens.

Dizzy yet? This is only a smattering of claims about the Kingdom of God in scripture, but I hope the idea's coming a little more into focus. Ultimately, the Kingdom of God is focused on God and God's teachings throughout time; and it embodies those teachings perfectly. It's coming in that perfection some time in the future, but we live in it now. All things are of that Kingdom, all things are God's, even those things that think they aren't. So, when I was a kid looking at that little placemat and imagining how cool it would be to have a cuddly sheep friend or a pet lion, my imagination was unknowingly straying into some corner of the Kingdom of God. A corner that was safe and peaceful for all. These days, I spend a little less time gazing at placemats, but there's still plenty in the world that invites us to imagine growing closer to the realized Kingdom of God. If all things are God's, I think it actually becomes much easier on a conceptual level to identify those things that are wrong in the world, those things that fall short of that Kingdom. At the same time, it becomes much, much harder. Because we have to separate out what scripture says and what we wish it said. For example, I wish the

Bible said that making tons of money was a good thing. On the whole, it doesn't; in fact, Jesus talks about money more than anything else, nearly always suggesting we get rid of it and give it to the poor. And doing so brings you and the world a little closer to the Kingdom of God.

So, when the unlikely team of Pharisees and Herodians come to Jesus and set their trap, it's absolutely vital to understand all that Kingdom of God stuff. See, in Matthew, Jesus brings nearly everything back to that. It's a reality that will put things right, again, with the true ruler of the world back on the throne. So, when the trap is set and the question about taxes comes up, Jesus asks to see a coin. A coin that bears the image of a man, the emperor. But remember, in the Kingdom of God, there's only one ruler: Christ. Rome is nothing. The currency of Rome is nothing. The man who sits on the throne in Rome is nothing. At least, nothing more than anyone else, not in God's Kingdom. They are all citizens of the Kingdom of God, though few realize it at the time. The coin Jesus holds might as well be a seashell or a discarded post-it note. Why not give it to Rome? But also, this world is real. Rome does wield power, albeit earthly power, and that affects God's people. So yes, stay healthy, stay safe, remember that this is nothing in the grand scheme of God's Kingdom, but also, do what you need to do that allows you to spread the good news. See, all things are God's. For this crowd, some things are Caesar's, but all things are God's. It's like a rhombus/square situation. Just because something belongs to Caesar does not mean it escapes God. God encompasses all. And the coming Kingdom will correct all.

If you read back further, back into the depths of Mosaic Law, in Leviticus and Deuteronomy and all those first handful of books, what you'll find is a whole lot of rules to live by. 613, to be exact. And while our modern ears often hear them as antiquated and sometimes barbaric, we miss something if we read only at that level. When God commands people to wear only certain kinds of fabric, for example, we're tempted to think of the poly-cotton blends filling our closets. We want to think of ways out. But our resistance to that sort of granular law for everyday living overlooks the point of those laws. The point was to invite God into every aspect of life, down to the fibers of our clothing and the fiber of our being. The Kingdom of God is like a shirt that warms you, a meal that fills you, a love that holds you. 613 ways that God touches your everyday life. Now, I know, there are certainly some things we don't like and a fair number we don't need to live by among those early laws, but I think we can hold onto that idea. That all things are God's and we should search for ways to invite God into more and more aspects of our lives. From what we decide to buy at the grocery store to who we decide to lend a hand to.

Even now, when the entire country is buzzing about who to vote for, we walk a delicate line as citizens of the Kingdom of God and of the United States of America. We remember that rhombus/square relationship between God and Rome and lay it on top of our lives. Render unto Caesar when you pay your taxes or cast your vote, but remember your allegiance to that Kingdom of God first. Lately, my mind is connecting more and more things to politicians. Actually, politicians are actively connecting more and more things in every one of our lives back to them. That's a great and tragic reversal. Because what that tendency does is take all those daily things that should direct my heart to God and instead directs it to some human.

The other day, I was listening to a podcast that interviewed Richard Cizik. Cizik used to be a Christian lobbyist, and he started off leading the charge among Christians seeking to make positive change around what he called "Creation Care." Basically, he was a Christian environmentalist, and he had tons of Christians, regardless of political affiliation, on board. He did this work for a good while and became a bit of a rock star in Christian circles. But something shifted, and many of his cheerleaders and supporters flipped, abandoning Creation Care in favor of something very different. He eventually left the business altogether, disillusioned by what he'd seen. Cizik said he'd gotten into the work because his faith informed his politics. But he felt he had to leave when his politics started informing his faith. In other words, he was happy to render what he believed unto

Caesar, but when Caesar tried to render back what he should believe in place of the Kingdom of God, he could not abide.

Look, I wish this were simpler. It'd be a whole lot easier if living for the Kingdom of God was as easy as remembering funny-shaped lions laying down with sheep on a placemat. But it's not. It's a complicated thing to be in this Kingdom. But there are some constants. Christ is King. You can work towards those purposes or you can work against them. All aspects of your life touch that reality, and all you do should bring that Kingdom a little bit closer. It's a tall order, no doubt about it; it is hard. It is bold. But remember, it is also filled with grace and justice and peace. And you are its citizens. Citizens, first, of the Kingdom of God.