

# BEYOND IDENTITY

God of servant rule, your kingdom breaks our tangled webs where state and church collude to worship power and trade on fear: grant us the wit and will to give you what is your own, no more nor less than all the world and time; through Jesus Christ, whose kingdom comes.

*A Collect for Proper 24, Prayers for An Inclusive Church*

## THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Proper 24A: Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

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### ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

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#### THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 22:15-22

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

#### Identity.

Even when we think we have our identity all worked out, it is never far from being an open and active question in our lives and in the life of the world around us.

Generally, these days, in Western culture, we approach identity as about *me*: who am I in particular? What is my private, personal identity and how do I both embrace and express who I am, how

do I signal to others that I am *this*, not that....

We seek to distinguish and we seek distinction – how am I special, what are my gifts, my abilities, qualities, character. Again, all of this usually laid side-by-side with perceptions of the gifts, abilities, qualities of others – usually many others.

As population rises, resources become more scarce, complexity

seems to multiply exponentially (or our perception of it), we begin to triage identity or identities, often scrambling to sort questions we never knew we had to answer about ourselves, our friends, our family members, our neighbors.

All of this in a rising tide of fear, as our awareness of local and global threat invades our consciousness – bullies and terrorists, a continual flow of b.s. substitutes for reliable information or respectful conversation – identity descends to a function of survival and safety. The triage is a literal sorting of victims, many of them aspects of our own identity where we once placed our hope, our faith, now constrained into factions, almost as cell groups, to be able to maintain our safety, what we think we need to hang onto as basic health and welfare, and to be able to function in a world we may perceive as increasingly hostile or unfriendly, scarcity of every sort haunting everyone....

And we become, intentionally or not, consumed by or victim of, perhaps proponent and victim of “identity politics” – sorted into bins, factionalized, polarized, sometimes weaponized, isolated to screens that purvey a reflection of our particular identity, our personally curated reality – including the politics and positions that proffer safety, and also dictate our tastes and patterns of consumption (realizing we may,

actually, know nothing about what we supposedly espouse, but these judgments and stances are *mine* or, more importantly, they are what *my group* says about me [and about you]).

Along the way, this politics and economy of identity exchanges our fear for wealth and empowerment for some, poverty and vulnerability for others...

And lest we imagine that all of this has been invented by Facebook or Breitbart, by notions of political correctness, by the right, alt-right, or left, mainline Christianity or the evangelicals – or some other religion, the Russians or Chinese, we arrive at our gospel reading this morning.

Jesus, fresh from an inauspicious but disturbing arrival in Jerusalem (was he mocking the Romans riding on his foal of a donkey? *I think so...*), turning the tables in the temple, the ground of an exploitative hegemony between the Roman occupiers and Jewish King Herod’s agents – where everyone got rich except the people going there to pray... Jesus runs into the Romans and the Herodians together, now colluding to trip him up and send him away; they’ve decided he’s a threat to power and wealth – so bullies and storm troopers can be friends.

And, we know this too, they can be ingenious. Answer one way

the religious establishment gets you, the other way, you fall into the hands of the civil authorities.

“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

It’s worth noting here that taxation was everything to Rome. Why go to all the bother of an empire without the benefit of a revenue stream – a healthy one? Also, direct taxation of the Jewish people was relatively new in the days of Jesus’ public ministry, always before money flowed to Rome through corruption of religious authorities, but no one had to openly pay.

And when he asks for a coin and asks for both the image and the inscription, Jesus is underscoring that, in paying the tax, people are asked both to participate in idolatry and to affirm Caesar as the supreme sacred being on earth – the right owner and savior of the world. No faithful Jewish person could do that.

When Jesus responds as he does: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” he is not inventing the concept of separation of church and state, which was not “a thing” in those days. No, he is saying something vastly more challenging, that is what we need to hear these days: God created and owns the earth and everything in it. While speaking over the heads of his

adversaries, Jesus was saying that nothing at all could legitimately be paid to Caesar.

And so, the root of identity is not “me” and how special I am, it is in the fullness of God. And also, the identity of the person or group who threatens me is also in the fullness of God.

Jesus is not simply showing how to be clever in responding to ingenious, cunning questions.

He calls us beyond narrow identity and to face our resistance to both our larger selves and the shrunken heads we have made of our supposed foes who threaten us but do not truly have the power to do that – anymore than Caesar Augustus was the savior of the world.

Jesus reveals that we are unalterably connected with one another and with every other person, those we like and those we don’t, those who seem to be like “us,” because they hate what we hate, and also those who are objects of that hate.

In the baptism liturgy, when we promise, with God’s help, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves and to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being, we are committing to a life, individually and as a faith community, very unlike the contention of the world

around us.

And from that commitment come practices that support this deep identity given to us, not identity concocted by us. Among those practices are our own gathering and the open hospitality that bring us face to face, here and beyond these walls, with those who may agree with us and those who don't, those who support us and those who potentiate our fear. We move closer, not further apart, suffering with others, seeing that all people suffer (thus compassion),

and also delighting, sharing joy with people who are not just our "tribe" and so discovering not simply that we are all seeking God but that we are all in God already.

Much more can be said and, these days "demand" our attention, our personal and communal action, as people of faith and citizens of a world that is God's world. These days demand our faithful action in truly and deeply and practically giving to God the things that are God's.



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