

Sermon 10/22/17 Christ Church

SERMON: "It's a Trap"

Rev. Anderson

Will you pray with me? Lord God, we come to you this morning seeking peace, the peace that Jesus promised and demonstrated. We ask you to work in us to keep us cool when our faith and our beliefs are challenged, to remember that when we walk with you we know we are on the right path and living within your heavenly kingdom. In the name of your Christ we pray Amen.

Do you get upset when you are confronted with some obvious piece of anti-religious behavior or get into a serious spiritual lather when confronted by a character on a TV show saying something religiously offensive? Do you find yourself getting thin-skinned when you observe an identified Christian speaker say hateful things about others, things we know Jesus would repudiate?

I see close-to-out-of-control examples of both often when I follow the news on the internet. The ability to respond to articles and posts seems to encourage the reactions. you can regularly see posts that huff and puff a lot about some story in a newspaper that indicates that somewhere a new law got passed that seems to chip away a bit at some cherished piece of Christian expression – some school takes the Ten Commandments off of the wall of a classroom or another school rules to keep a science textbook that teaches the tenets of evolution or vice versa. Christians feel they are being persecuted or made to look like fools by such actions, that the Christian identity of the nation is fading away.

At the same time, can we be faithful and responsible people of faith and just let either kind of statement just go by?

Jesus generally did not seem that bothered by instances of pagan practice or a thoroughly secular mindset.

After all, the Roman government in question in Matthew 22 was not some religiously neutral (much less faith-affirming) institution. Few Christians in North America can imagine serving a government that was openly idolatrous the way Rome was. Indeed, most scholars believe that the inscription on the coin to which Jesus refers in verse 20 was likely some blasphemous designation. Some scholars believe that the denarius in question likely bore the image of Tiberius with the inscription "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus" and an image of the "high priest" Livia on the coin's obverse.

"In God We Trust" it wasn't. Caesar was the official *Dominus et Deus*, "Lord and God" of the realm.

Yet Jesus calmly deflected questions about it all even as he held the coin in his own hand. He did not fling the coin away as though it were white-hot with paganism. He did not roll his eyes at the *unbelievable* fact that not everyone worshiped the God Jesus called Father. That alone is curious and just possibly instructive.

Jesus took this opportunity to convey some pretty profound theological truths after all. Because Rome at that time was all-powerful; Pax Romana covered most of the known world and the influence and almighty power of the Empire was all-but unchallenged. Indeed, when a revolt against taxes in A.D. 70 took place, Jerusalem paid the ultimate price for daring to stand up to the Caesar.

But Jesus was able to see down to a deeper and more profound reality. When you know that the whole world belongs to God and when you know that above all the human heart is what belongs to the Creator God who fashioned us in his image, then even the big, bright, loud, and resplendent realities of this world become mere sideshows and distractions. But they do not ultimately touch God. They do not finally threaten God. Getting all excited about the powers that be and becoming hyper focused on them tempts us to downplay and underestimate the glorious sovereignty of God.

When Jesus takes the Caesar's coin into his hand and holds it up in front of his bewildered questioners, you can almost see him shrug his shoulders, furrow his brow, and just generally convey the idea, "What are you talking about? THIS is all you have to ask me about? Who cares? This means nothing! Get a life! And remember that God is still ever and only God and that no human power can dislodge him, displace him, or challenge his claims on our hearts and on this world that belongs to him."

At the same time we are called to be in the world, but not of the world. Our recognition that we and our world belong to God doesn't relieve us of the responsibility of speaking out and acting when we see things going wrong and there are things we can do to change them. It's God's world but people, with all their weaknesses and temptations are in it creating the kind of traps we read about Jesus so adroitly avoiding.

I see the potential for a similar false choice in the upcoming election. Proposition One, the legalization of casinos in our county, is being skillfully presented as an opportunity to build cash generating community centers to fund education and provide wholesome venues for community activities. The promotion is fascinating by the way it carefully avoids the term "gambling." In the few cases that the real objective is addressed, the term "gaming" is used, but sparingly. We can all ask ourselves how much our taxes have gone down thanks to the legal gambling already allowed in the state. We can also ask where the money is for all the TV ads and road signs every 100 yards from Kittery to Scarborough. Somebody hopes to make a lot of money and it isn't all the school

districts in the county. We also know that where there is gambling there is an increase in the community destroying vices that accompany it.

We don't have to demonstrate against the proposition but we do need to make our opinions heard and vote "NO" on Proposition One. Amen.

Let us pray, Lead us Lord, give us direction recognizing that we and our world come from you. Help us discern false traps created to lead us astray. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen