

**Series: The Words of Jesus (His Public Teachings)**

**Today: Words on Politics and Faith**

**Text: Luke 20:20-26**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**

**Sunday, October 12, 2008**

**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

I don't know about you, but I have had it! It makes me very sad because the political campaign in which we are engaged is one of the most important decisions we will make in our lifetime, but I have had it! I want to say, "Enough already with the negative campaigning and the questioning of character on both sides. These are four fine people, each with a different view of what is best for America, and we need to get back to talking about views and their visions and make our decisions based on what we hear them say and not what the pundits and news analysts think about what they said.

This has been a brutal campaign which, thank God, has led to some humor or we would all go crazy; like the story I heard the other day. The fellow found out about an operation which would enable him to get a new brain. He went to the hospital where the surgery had been perfected and asked the doctors what was in stock. "Well," they said, "here is an excellent engineer's brain--a finely honed, precise bit of gray matter. It will cost you \$500 an ounce." "What else?" the man wanted to know.

"This," they told him, "Is a lawyer's brain--a collection of shrewd, tricky little gray cells. It is \$1,000 an ounce." "Is that all you have?"

"No," they said. "Here is a doctor's brain, packed full of anatomical knowledge. It is \$5,000 an ounce." "I don't know," the fellow said. "Don't you have anything else?"

The doctors looked at each other then motioned for the man to step over to a covered container. "This," they said in hushed tones, "is a legislator's brain. It costs \$250,000 an ounce." "Wow!" exclaimed the fellow. "Why so expensive?"

"In the first place," the doctors told him, "it is hardly used. In the second place, do you realize how many legislators you need to get an ounce of brains?"

I think it was on a family vacation this past summer when I first realized that I'd had it. The primaries were over, and I knew the general election was bound to be worse than what we heard there. I knew the rhetoric of both of the major political parties would get nasty, and it started the week we were on the Outer Banks of North Carolina with the relentless attacks and counterattacks which play upon our fears and our doubts about our future as a nation.

We had never been there before, so one day we made our way to Kitty Hawk, the site of the famous first flight of Wilbur and Orville Wright in December, 1903. At the top of Kill Devil Hill there is a monument to the event itself, and the inscription caught my attention. It reads, "*In commemoration of the conquest of air by Wilbur and Orville Wright; Genius achieved by dauntless resolution and unconquerable faith.*"

When I read those words, I thought to myself, "Is not this what we hope to find in the leaders who have put themselves before us: *dauntless resolution and unconquerable faith*?" We want people who will work hard and who will seek the wisdom of a power greater than themselves as they guide and direct the future of our country. So as we continue our series on the Words of Jesus, we thought it might be good to take a look at words he spoke to the people of his time about the role of faith in government and politics.

The context of these particular words of Jesus comes on the Tuesday of Holy Week. On Sunday, Jesus had made a political statement about who he perceived himself to be. He chose to

ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. He came as a King, but not a conqueror. Had he chosen a horse, things would have been different. Rome would have had something to fear. With palm branches and garments laid on the road before him, the people hailed him as the Messiah, the chosen one of God who came to deliver the Israelites from captivity and to establish his reign upon the earth. However, he did not come to incite an insurrection. He came in peace to capture the minds and the hearts of faithful people. The kingdom he sought to establish was not a temporal kingdom, but to establish the reign of God in the lives of believing people.

On Monday, he must have been the talk of Jerusalem. Those who believed that his reign was to be on earth were just waiting for a sign which would empower them to take up arms and drive Rome from their land so they could reestablish the reign of King David.

Rome perceived him as a threat to their power. The scribes and the Pharisees perceived him as a threat to their power. State and church were working together to find a way to be rid of him, but they needed a charge; something they could find him guilty of; hopefully a capital crime which would give them authority to put him to death. Our scripture says, *“They watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest.”* The literal translation would be, *“They laid in wait for him to ambush him.”*

One of the spies asks a question. On the surface all it requires is a yes or no question: *“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?”* The spies were there on behalf of the religious leaders. The tax in question was a poll tax. It wasn't a lot of money; a few pennies, really. It was collected for every man; woman and child for the privilege of living in a Roman territory, but it was the source of a great deal of controversy.

The spies were doing the bidding of their pastors. They knew if he answered yes, he would be guilty of heresy. To pay money to Caesar was to acknowledge that Caesar is the King,

and zealous Jews had no other King but God. If he answers no, he is guilty of treason for this was the tribute which was to be paid to Caesar which acknowledged that he was the one to whom they owed allegiance.

Jesus asks for a Roman coin. He looks at the icon Caesar stamped on. He asks who it is, and when the answer comes, he says, "*Render to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's.*" And our text records that those who heard that answer were amazed and they became silent.

They are silent for a reason. Their plan to trap him was foiled. He had spoken a truth which may help us as we make our decisions about the leaders we shall elect and what do we learn from the words of Jesus? First, we live in two different worlds. As followers of Jesus, we hold a dual citizenship. We are citizens of the country in which we live, and we are also citizens of the Kingdom of God. Second, as followers of Jesus, the Kingdom of God takes priority.

### **Dual Citizenship**

When Jesus asked to see the coin, he asked the question whose head was on the coin. The Greek word he uses is *icon*. Stamped on the coin was the head of the emperor. He does not ask where the icon of God is stamped. His listeners knew. Human beings are made in the image of God. Human beings have the icon of God stamped on them.

We live in a country where we enjoy incredible blessings. One need only travel to a third world country to understand how blessed we truly are, and we owe something to the country in which we live in return for the blessings we have received. We are Americans, and our form of government provides us with more freedom than any other country in the world. In spite of the economic crisis we are now facing, and even though we may have lost a great deal in the midst of it, our economic system is still the envy of the free world. We may have serious

questions about the delivery of health care, but make no mistake about it, health care in the United States is some of the finest the world has to offer.

As citizens of this country, we owe our allegiance to its highest and best values, but while we live in the midst of such blessedness, we are also aware that our country is capable of the basest and worst of what human beings can be and do. These last few weeks have revealed some of the worst of who we are with our greed, selfishness, fear, and anxiety. Now more than ever we need to recognize that, as much as we love this country, it is not the only country where we claim citizenship. We also claim to be citizens of the kingdom of God, and when we see something in our country which is at odds with the values of the kingdom of God, it is our responsibility to affirm our higher calling and speak the truth in love to the country which has given so much to us.

There is an old Cherokee Indian tale about a grandfather attempting to pass wisdom to his grandson. He told the boy about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, ' My son, the battle is between two ' wolves ' inside us all. One is Evil. - It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is Good. - It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith. '

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: ' which wolf wins?' The old Cherokee simply replied, ' the one you feed.'

### **The Priority of the Kingdom of God**

Jesus recognizes that we have a choice in our responses to the events of our lives. We can either see things from the temporal, or we can choose to view things from the eternal. When the two are in competition with one another, the values of the eternal must be chosen first.

The icon of Caesar is stamped on the denari to show it belongs to Caesar. The icon of God is stamped on our lives to show that we belong to God. Our identity is that we belong to God, and the kingdom of God must always take priority in our lives.

This is what we affirm every time we baptize a child. We give them a new last name, and we claim them for the values of the Kingdom rather than the values of the culture. Today, when we baptized little Wayne Mullen, he became a Christian, and that means that no matter what, he will always have a choice about the values he chooses to follow. He can choose the values of our culture with its focus on material gain, and its focus on only things that we can see, touch, taste or smell. Or he can choose the values of the Kingdom and look at life from a different set of values.

So my prayer for us as we move through these final weeks of a very disturbing political campaign are in the words of a prayer attributed to Sir Francis Drake, the 16<sup>th</sup> century British naval officer who became an explorer.

*Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves, when our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little, when we arrive safely because we have sailed too close to the shore.*

*Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess, we have lost our thirst for the waters of life; having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity; and in our efforts to build a new Earth, we have allowed our vision of the new heaven to dim.*

*Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery; where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars. We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes; and to push into the future in strength, courage, hope, and love."*

### **Conclusion**

I am weary of the political process. I am weary of the incessant flow of attack ads; the partial truth masquerading as the whole truth; the divisive language which polarizes us as a people—I am weary and long for something more, something better. I have made my decision about who I will vote for, but I am not going to share it here. It would be inappropriate. I will be happy to talk with you privately about who I have chosen and why I made my decision, and I am praying that it is based on the same values I am holding up to you this morning.

Call me an idealist, but I believe God holds us to a higher standard and a different standard when it comes to faith and politics, and I pray that this will be the voice we listen for as we make our decisions about who is best to lead us.