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Christ the King & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Cody & Powell, WY

Twenty-third Sunday after Trinity

November 12, 2023

Text: Matthew 22:15–22

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We Christians hold citizenship in two kingdoms, not two countries, but two kingdoms. We are citizens of this earthly kingdom. That specifically means we are citizens of the United States of America residing in the great state of Wyoming. This citizenship is temporary; it lasts until our earthly life is over. We are also citizens of God's heavenly kingdom. That specifically means we are members of His holy Christian Church as she is manifested around the altar, pulpit, and font of Christ the King/Immanuel Lutheran Church. This citizenship is eternal (Phil. 3:20); for it not only applies during this earthly life but into the glorious eternity of the new heavens and new earth. Matthew 22:21 describes these two kingdoms, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Lutherans have typically described the Christian's dual citizenship by saying the earthly, political kingdom is God's left-hand kingdom while the Church is God's right-hand kingdom. The imagery of right and left-hand kingdoms is intended to establish that God is the ruler of both. It's God's right and God's left hand. I can't emphasize this enough. God rules over both kingdoms. He truly is the sovereign Lord who rules by divine right. He is not elected. He does not rule by the consent of the governed. God, and God alone, is the only true, absolute monarch. People may rebel against His rule and reign. But such human folly cannot thwart His absolute rule in both kingdoms.

There is another aspect of the imagery of God's right and left-hand kingdom that is especially important for us. The two kingdoms, church and state, are to be distinguished, right-hand and left-hand, but they cannot be separated. We Lutherans have never been totally comfortable with Thomas Jefferson's

comment about the “separation of church and state.” These two kingdoms can never be separated when referring to God’s rule over both. Nor can they be separated when referring to our earthly lives. We make distinctions. Each kingdom has its own sources of authority. But not hard separations.

In the state, God’s left-hand kingdom, the Lord God establishes and works through governments, laws, and human customs. State authority is limited to earthly life, property, land, and to a large extent, our bodies. Civil magistrates are to be honored for they are called “servants of God” twice, in Romans 13:4 and 13:6. The Lord has given the state the power of coercion, the power of the sword, according to Romans 13:4. (*Veteran’s Day*) The goal of government, according to I Peter 2:13, is “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.” All governmental actions should accomplish those two things: punish or prevent evil and support and praise the good. Don’t believe the falsehood commonly stated that you can’t legislate morality. That’s not what the Bible teaches. In order for governments to do their work properly, they must be able to discern between what is good and what is evil.

However, governments and magistrates do not have the authority to rule over the conscience. Their authority is limited: to punish evil and to praise good. As Christians, we give honor to all legitimate forms of civil government as an act of worship and devotion – not to the state, that would be a gross form of idolatry! – but to God Himself. Romans 13:5 says, “Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.”

In the church, the Lord’s right-hand kingdom, the Lord works through God’s revealed Word, the Bible. Churchly authority is limited to the Bible. It alone is the source of all doctrine, belief, worship, and practice. God’s Word of Law and Gospel bring light and clarity to life in this world as we prepare for life in the world to come. As God’s revealed, inspired Word without error or mistake, the Bible must hold the place of being the highest authority. We cannot go against God’s Word.

In the Church, the Lord has established that congregations are to be served with God's Word through pastors who commanded by God to shepherd, to watch over the flock of God. In Acts 20:28, the apostle Paul gave this command to the Ephesian pastors gathered around him, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."

The author of the book of Hebrews taught the church that they are to follow and obey their pastors. Hebrew 13:7, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." Pastors are commanded by God to watch out for your souls. And we pastors will give an account to God for our care of your souls. Our oversight and ministry must be for your good as defined by God's Word. Pastoral authority is limited.

Pastors are servants of the Church, not lords, but servants. We are commanded by God to love and care for the God's precious saints using God's Word and Sacraments, prayer, and sacrifice. Our ministry must be concerned not only with your day-to-day life but with your conscience. Paul told Timothy, the young pastor, the goal and purpose of all pastoral ministry in I Timothy 1:5, "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." My prayer is that each of you would have pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith all growing from love for God and man. To serve these ends, a pastor must be absolutely and totally devoted to God and His Word in life, work, prayer, thoughts, home, leisure, heart, and soul. Pastors must live a life that is worthy of imitation as Paul described in Philipians 3:17, "Brothers, join in imitating me, as keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us."

This is why Christians must continue to gather around God's Word and Sacraments regularly and faithfully. Not only because we have God's

command to do so. But because through God's Word, prayer, worship, and the love we Christians share with one another, the Lord Himself gives to us all the gifts of His eternal kingdom. The governance of the Christ's right-hand kingdom is especially established upon the precious Gospel of Christ's life, death, and resurrection for the eternal salvation of sinners.

As Christians, we live under two kingdoms. But we serve, love, worship, and afore one Lord, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We give to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar. And to God the things that belong to God. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, we recognize His Lordship over both kingdoms. God alone possesses all authority; His rule and reign are not limited. To Him we give everything, body and soul, in faith and love as we live in both kingdoms.

This is one area of concern I have with our current cultural moment. People of all faiths but especially Christians are being told by political and even some religious authorities that people can believe whatever they want but keep it private. Keep it in your homes and your places of worship. Don't bring it into the public sphere of economics, education, government, and so forth. Holding religious convictions and actually living according to them in the left and right-hand kingdoms will get you into trouble in many, many places in our country.

But dear Christians, we must follow the teachings of our King and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Even if that means getting us into trouble with political and religious authorities. This, in fact, is the situation that Jesus is facing in today's gospel text. The Herodians, who represented political authority, and the Pharisees, who represented religious authority, joined forces together in order "to entangle Jesus in his talk" (vs. 15). It's in this hostile setting that Jesus says, Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God. Our entire life is lived in obedience to our sovereign Lord as we serve Him in both kingdoms.

My goal is for us to leave this service today knowing better how we live as Christians in this world. I want you to live in Christian love with joyful courage. I truly believe God has given us this time to shine the light of truth and goodness, virtue and beauty, joy and confidence with ever greater brightness. In the face of so much fear, anger, and uncertainty, we as the people of God stand before the world to say “Christ is risen from the dead. He rules and reigns in time and eternity.” We live in both kingdoms as loyal subjects to God. He is the source of our joy, our hope, and a pure conscience. Be at peace in Christ Jesus, the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.