

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 15, 2017
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

The Sermon is based on the Scripture lessons for today: Jeremiah 29:4-7, Romans 13:1-7 and Matthew 22:15-22.

“Dual Citizenship”

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, heirs of the Lutheran Reformation,

The concept of separation of Church and State is one that is at the forefront of a variety of political debates today in our country. There have been those times in history where the lines between church and state were blurred or non-existent. When one considers the early history of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, one would conclude that there was for God’s people no real separation of their civil and their religious life. The Lord himself provided them with Laws to govern the way they lived together as his people in their society and the way that they were to worship him in their spiritual lives.

The Old Testament people of Israel were, for a time, ruled by God himself, who gave them the laws they needed to guide their moral choices, their worship, and their society. God spoke to his people through Moses and the other prophets, and later through the judges he appointed to lead them. Eventually the Israelites decided that they wanted to be like other nations. Everyone else had kings to rule them, and they wanted a king too. God told the prophet Samuel, **“They have rejected me from being king over them”** (1 Samuel 8:7). It was not the first time that the Israelites had rebelled against the lordship of their heavenly King, and it would not be the last.

With the establishment of the Monarchy in Israel, the Lord instituted a separation of Church and State. Previously Samuel the priest was both the civil and spiritual leader of the people. When Samuel crowned Saul as the king of Israel, a new order was established. It was clear that God was still providing leaders for his people. But now, Samuel was no longer directly involved in the civil affairs of the nation. And of course Saul was not directly involved in the spiritual affairs of the people.

Throughout their history, the people of Israel often failed and faltered in their allegiance to God, and finally God allowed them to be overcome by their enemies and taken into exile in Babylon. They longed to be home again and free of foreign rule. But speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, God told his people to establish themselves in the land of their exile. They should marry, build homes, plant crops, and pray for the foreign land in which they lived, for in its good they would find their good.

Essentially the Lord was telling his people that they could serve him and be blessed by him even while they were living in a foreign land and under the rule of a foreign leader because they were citizens of two kingdoms.

Down through the ages there was an ebb and flow in regard to the concept of church and state. Sometimes the distinction was obvious. Other times it was a bit blurry. Sometimes the church would go forth in battle with the sword to conquer. Other times the government would convene gathers to settle religious disputes.

The framers of our constitution did not use the phrase separation of church and state. However, the First Amendment to the constitution forbids congress to make laws regarding the establishment of a religion or the prohibition of the free exercise of religion. According to constitution, the government is to protect the spiritual life of the citizens of our country without establishing religion. These thoughts are behind the Supreme Court rulings which have more clearly defined the issues of separation of church and state for our country.

Let's take a little bit of a closer look at this issue from the perspective of Scripture. When we do that we will discover that although Scripture, like the Constitution; does not use the phrase, "separation of church and state," non-the-less the concept is clearly taught.

People in Jesus' day didn't like to pay taxes any more than we do, maybe even less so, because their taxes were given in support of their hated Roman conquerors. Jesus' enemies chose the painful and controversial subject of taxes to set a trap for him. Was it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? If Jesus said, "Pay the taxes," then the crowds might very well have turned against him, thinking that he supported their Roman overlords. If Jesus said, "Don't pay," then his enemies could accuse him of treason and hand him over to the authorities. It was a no-win situation if there ever was one. But Jesus was fully aware of the trap his enemies had planned, and he simply asked to see the coin that was used to pay the tax. He asked, **"Whose image and inscription are on the coin?"** The coin bore the image and inscription of Caesar, and that provided the answer to the controversy. To his enemies and to the watching and wondering crowds—people who bore the image of God their Creator—Jesus said, **"Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."** The coin is Caesar's, so give it to him. You are created in the image of God, and you belong to him.

Like the crowds of Jesus' day, we too must pay our taxes and we owe allegiance to an earthly government. We are citizens of this earth and live within a certain nation, state, city or town. We, however, know something about those earthly governments and their authority that is unknown to most earthly rulers. We know that their existence, their authority to rule, comes from God. The apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Christians in Rome: **"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God ... Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed."** God is our King. He rules over us in love, and he has given the earthly governments the authority to rule over us for our good.

You probably know the old song, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," and no, I'm not going to sing it for you. The title of that song is true enough. He does have the whole world in his hands, and when we describe God's rule over all things, we talk about God's "two hands" and about the two kingdoms or realms over which he rules, the kingdom of his right hand and the kingdom of his left hand.

What we call the kingdom of God's right hand, or the kingdom of grace, is his rule over his Church, his rule over his redeemed people. By God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, we have been brought into this kingdom, where he rules over us with his Word and forgiveness. It is as members of this kingdom that we seek to spread the Gospel of Christ and his forgiveness throughout the world. That is why Christ has left us here in this world to live not only in his kingdom but also as citizens of earthly kingdoms which he himself has established.

What we call the kingdom of God's left hand, or as it is sometimes called, the kingdom of power, is a way to describe God's rule over all people, Christians and non-Christians alike. In the kingdom of his left hand, God works through earthly rulers and their laws to promote what is good and restrain evil. Certainly not every earthly king or ruler governs in a godly way—that is very rare—but even unbelieving rulers, those who misuse their power, have that power only by God's authority. He works through them and behind them and moves and removes them as he wills. Working through them, working "behind them," as though hiding behind them, God brings order to this world that he created and loves.

Martin Luther was a redeemed child of God, and he was, just as we are, a citizen of God's right hand kingdom, the kingdom of grace. Luther was also subject to earthly rulers, to Frederick the Wise and his successors, the rulers of the territory of Saxony in which Luther lived. Luther was also subject to Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire, the ruler of much of Europe at that time. Luther lived in an age and place where there

was no separation of church and state as we know it, and the reformer had opponents in both. Through his study of God's Word, Luther rediscovered the truth of the Gospel, the truth that we are saved not by works, not through buying church-authorized letters of pardon, but by God's grace through faith in Jesus, our Lord and King whose blood paid the price of our salvation.

Martin Luther shared the good news that he discovered in God's Word. He taught, preached and wrote about the salvation that is ours by faith. But church officials acted to silence Luther. The leadership of the church of Luther's day eventually declared the reformer to be heretic, a false teacher. Working in concert with the church, the emperor declared Luther to be an outlaw; if Luther was a danger to the church, he was thought to be a danger to society as well. The reformer could be captured and killed, and no one was to read his writings or give him aid or assistance in any way.

But God was at work through the kingdom of his left hand to protect his busy monk. Luther's territorial ruler, Frederick the Wise, acted in secrecy to protect his well-known professor and pastor. Frederick arranged to have Luther kidnapped and hidden away in Wartburg Castle for safety. Even from his hiding place, Luther continued to teach the Gospel, writing letters and translating the New Testament into German.

Even though he was declared to be an outlaw and condemned by earthly rulers, Martin Luther advocated obedience to the government, knowing from his study of Scripture that earthly rulers have their authority from God. But when those rulers decided to forbid the teaching of the Gospel, they could not be obeyed. The princes and other rulers who embraced the faith of the Reformation had to obey God rather than men, and they risked their lives to declare their allegiance to the King of kings, the Lord Jesus Christ. Many years later, those princes and rulers would win the right to worship as they chose.

Today, here and now, we are citizens of the kingdom of grace, although we may sometimes long for the fullness and glory of the kingdom that will be ours when Jesus returns. Until then, we, like the exiled Israelites, must pray for the earthly nation, states and cities in which we live. In their good we will find our good. Ours is a dual citizenship, as we live as citizens of both the kingdom of grace and the kingdom of power, the kingdom of God's right hand and the kingdom of his left hand. We know that God really does "have the whole world in his hands" as we live under his care and protection as his redeemed people. We live, here and now, as our Lord lived among us, following in his footsteps, living in love and service toward the people around us. As the apostle Peter writes, **"Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God"** (1 Peter 2:16). Amen.

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