

Ordinary 29-34

by Matthew L. Kelley

October 19

Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

“Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and render unto God what is God’s!”

These are, without a doubt, some of the most difficult and ambiguous words in the gospels—maybe in the whole Bible. Over the years they’ve been used as a justification for Christians completely separating themselves from any political involvement, as a proof text for full cooperation with secular authorities, and everything in between. This passage is something of a biblical Rorschach test: what we see reveals something significant about the way we view the world.

This gospel text is part of the ordinary lectionary cycle, but perhaps it’s providential that it falls on a Sunday that’s only a few weeks away from the U.S. presidential election. If our preaching really is going to be relevant to the world we live in, then we have to mention the election. This is a tricky prospect for most preachers, because we don’t want to be seen as endorsing one candidate over another (risking our tax-exempt status), and because our congregations may be so divided over their preference of candidate that we risk alienating people if we even bring up the issue. What’s a preacher to do?

Maybe one way to approach this hot button issue is to ponder the question of just what is Caesar’s (i.e., what belongs to the ruling powers of this world) and what is God’s?

There’s a story about one particular pope in the middle ages who got mad about something a European monarch did, so he excommunicated the king. The king, knowing that meant he would be bound for Hell, if not in reality then at least in the minds of his subjects, realized he was defeated. The king proceeded to travel to the castle where the pope was staying and stand outside in the snow, barefoot, for several days before the pope agreed to absolve him of his sins and let him back in the

church. While Protestants have no official means of excommunication, threatening to withhold votes from a politician (as some prominent pastors have recently done) is the most comparable weapon a religious leader can have today. But is having, let alone using, such a weapon really a good idea?

Regarding the intersection of religion and politics, Martin Luther King Jr. said: “the church should be neither the master of the state nor the servant of the state, but the conscience of the state”. Threatening to withhold a large bloc of votes seems to be an effort to be the master of the state. Unconditionally supporting a war and all the atrocities that come with it because Caesar claims the Christian faith seems to be acting as the servant of the state.

For us to be the conscience of the state, we have to be engaged in what it is doing, but also be clear that our first loyalty is to God. This means more than allegiance to a particular political platform, no matter how many Bible verses we may be able to whip out to prove that it is the will of God. When we find ourselves disagreeing with Caesar, not liking the direction our government is going, we need to identify ourselves as the loyal opposition. The concepts of loyalty and opposition aren’t mutually exclusive, but they are in tension with one another. So perhaps tension is the best way for us to be the conscience of the state: wanting the best for it and occasionally having to resort to some tough love. It’s not an easy job, but it’s one that is sorely needed.

October 26

Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-36

Early on in his first letter to the church at Thessalonica, Paul argues that his motives, and those

of his colleagues in ministry, are pure. Their only desire was that people should know and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. Whether this claim is in response to accusations that came from within the Thessalonian church, speaking to a conflict raging within the apostle's own heart, or something else altogether is unclear. What we do know is that Paul speaks to a struggle that all preachers deal with. We are following our calling from God and acting out of a genuine desire for people to grow closer to God. Yet all of us are human and we all desire the acceptance of others. Complicating the matter is the fact that all professional clergy rely on their congregations for their livelihood, so there are inevitably many times that we back off from saying something that is on our hearts for fear of the repercussions—financial, social, or otherwise—if we displease our people.

Maybe the people God called in days past had it easier. After all, Moses went up to the mountain and spoke to God personally. Anyone who defied him was swallowed up by the earth or met some other unpleasant fate, so the Mosaic theocracy went along without serious challenge. None of us can claim such a private dialogue with God without having our sanity seriously questioned.

Then again, maybe those who claim to speak the word of God have always had a tough time. Jesus was constantly getting it from all sides. Some people thought he didn't heal enough. The disciples said his parables were too vague. And the religious leaders of Israel were threatened by everything he did, so much so that they had the Roman colonial government take him out—something the Romans weren't too shy about doing to anyone who might be the slightest threat to them.

Yep, dealing with our desire for approval has been a tricky thing for pretty much every person who has ever walked this earth, regardless of what vocation God has called them into. The Psalmist writes about those who follow God's ways instead of their own selfish desires, but the language comes off as Pollyanna-ish to most readers today. Those who follow the advice of the wicked and profit off exploiting others seem pretty darn happy most of the time! Those of us that are committed to higher purposes aren't blind. We still long for the success and popularity that seems so celebrated by

most of the world.

As usual, Jesus offers wisdom for those struggling with this tension. When pressed by someone who probably wouldn't approve of him one way or the other on a particular theological question, he gave an answer that transcended the either/or categories that define most theological discourse. "The greatest commandment is this: love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. And the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets are based on these two commandments."

Everything in God's law (in other words, the fullest expression of God's being to humanity) comes down to love, and love. Love is at the heart of how we were made, everything we are, and everything we are called to be. Therefore everything we do is to flow out of this essential love that is at the heart of God. Love will allow us to rise above our desires to be liked and tell the truth, even if it's not popular, and even if it hurts. Love will enable us to speak compassionately when we would rather condemn, if for no other reason to build ourselves up in the minds of others. Love is at the core of who God is, and who we as preachers, as human beings, are called to be.

November 2 (All Saints)
Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22;
1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

M.C. Escher is one of my favorite artists. He's the guy who did the pencil drawings featuring things like two hands drawing each other and a set of stairs that endlessly cycled back upon itself. Escher is great because you can't just glance at his work for a moment and get it. It compels you to stare at it for a long time, wondering if your eyes are playing tricks on you, and marvel at the imagination it must take to even think of things like this, which are impossible in real life. His art forces us to stretch the bounds of our understanding and reconsider what really is possible.

I wonder if hearing Jesus speak had a similar effect on people. In first century Palestine, everybody understood how the world worked. Might made right. They were living under the Roman Empire, af-

ter all. The Romans got to rule most of the known world because they had the biggest military, the most money, and were willing to do whatever it took to secure their power base. The amount of resources in the world was finite, so you did whatever you had to do to make sure you got as big a share as you could. But here's this preacher from Nazareth telling an entirely different story.

Here's Jesus saying that things like meekness, being persecuted, and being merciful in a merciless world are actually blessings from God! This is Jesus' first recorded teaching in Matthew's gospel, and it sets the tone for his ministry as described in all four gospels. Jesus is forcing us to radically rethink the priorities and value systems around which we orient our lives. On the one hand there's the story told by the empire (the ruling powers of the world) that says that the material realities of this life are the entirety of all creation, so material gain and success are the stick by which we measure individual worth. On the other hand, there's the story that Jesus is telling, which tells us there is a higher reality than what we can perceive with our five senses, and that this higher reality and the priorities that flow out of its being are to dictate how we live our lives in the world.

Jesus didn't just tell this story, he lived it out. He spent time with those who were considered outcasts by the world, and even by the religious system. He taught, ate with, and healed all people, regardless of where they fell in the societal class structure. Jesus forced the people of his day—and us as well—to consider a different story, a different understanding of what was really possible, and to consider that all they had ever known, or could know, might not be all there is.

This Sunday, we are celebrating All Saints, where we remember those who have passed from this life who have chosen to orient their lives around the story of Jesus as opposed to the stories offered in this world. A passage from Revelation makes a rare appearance in the lectionary cycle, and in it we find that those who get special recognition in the Kingdom are those who have chosen to orient their lives around the story of Jesus, and as a consequence have “come out of the great ordeal,” paying a heavy price for living by a different story

than the rulers of the world.

Texts like this are often used to condemn those outside of the Christian faith and reinforce the desire to feel superior to others, saying “they'll get theirs in the end!” While Revelation was written to people experiencing heavy persecution, and they undoubtedly felt comforted by the promise of future public justification, John is not trying to say that one group will end up being favored over another. That's just a Christianized version of the world's story. Instead, this text is trying to give comfort to those who have become so weary from walking this difficult road that Jesus calls us to that they begin to think that switching over to the world's story would just be easier. And maybe it would be. But the example of the countless saints over the years who have chosen the story of Jesus over the story of the world, and ultimately have left the world a much better place than they found it, have shown us that the more difficult road, the one with the delayed rewards, is ultimately the better one.

November 9

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7;
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

One of the many things my dad taught me was to appreciate the stories of Sherlock Holmes, the “Great Detective” of Victorian England. Sherlock Holmes isn't a hero because he's stronger or faster than anybody else, or even because he's necessarily smarter. He's a hero because he's able to notice things that everyone else overlooks. He was the original CSI before all the cool technologies we see on the TV shows. In one story he begins tracking down a criminal by looking at the hoof-prints from the getaway horse and noticing a particular pattern left by custom horseshoes. He notices these little details because he keeps his eyes open all the time and is always aware that things are not always what they seem.

Several of the lectionary texts this week are strong exhortations to keep our eyes open and not assume too much about the world around us. These texts are often misunderstood because we in the 21st century fail to understand the first cen-

tury audience to whom these texts were written. 1 Thessalonians is likely the earliest of Paul's pastoral letters that we have today. As such, they reflect very different attitudes about the future than do some of his later letters, like those he wrote to Timothy from prison in Rome. Paul, like many first generation Christians, believed that the end of the world was coming very soon, so there were some people who were worried that those in the church who died before the eschaton would not be part of God's coming reign. Some people who read this passage today believe it refers to an immanent rapture before an outpouring of God's wrath (the interpretation represented in the popular *Left Behind* books), but all Paul was doing was reassuring his people that no one, not even those who had died, were excluded from God's Kingdom. Instead of worrying, he encouraged them to be ready and watchful for whatever God might do in the future. We see Jesus preaching the same essential message in the parable from Matthew's gospel: be ready and watchful for whatever God might be doing.

As we enter the holiday season, everyone starts getting busy—making travel plans, buying gifts, cooking meals, decorating, etc. There's not enough time to do it all! In the midst of all the busyness of this time of year, one of the best things we can do for ourselves, and for each other, is to take time to sit back and observe our surroundings. Is everything exactly what we assume it to be? Or could God be using something in our everyday circumstances to call out to us and remind us about what is really important? Could God be whispering in a still, small voice? We'll only know if we take the time to watch and listen.

November 16
Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

I've always been kind of uneasy with the parable of the talents. It seems like the third servant got a raw deal. After all, it's not like the man who went away for a long time gave them specific instructions, he just told the servants to look after the funds. It could be that the other two servants were

generally more crafty people than the other one. Or maybe they were a little more educated and had taken Economics 101 while the third guy was out working the fields. Regardless, Jesus has a clear point in telling it: the gifts and graces you possess come from God, and God expects you to do something with them.

As a pastor I often talk with younger people about the direction they want to take with their lives. They often say things like, "I can't tell if God's calling me to be this or that. I think I have talents for both and do well at a number of things. What should I do?" Our talents and our passions are certainly a major clue to what God wants us to do with our lives. But too often we think of our calling in terms of the destination as opposed to the journey.

The question of how God is calling us to use our gifts and talents is not whether God has decided that we should be a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher, or even a pastor. The question is how would any of these vocations allow us to live out the gifts and graces God has given us? Are these venues the best way for us to live out the type of person God has called us to be? Our calling lies in the journey, of which the destination is a part, but certainly not the whole.

I'd like to think that if the third servant, who wasn't given nearly as many resources as his colleagues, had tried to do something with what he was given and hadn't made the money back, the man would have given him credit for at least giving it a shot. Sometimes we go forward with our best efforts and best intentions and we fail. Maybe it's because we didn't prepare properly or we didn't fully know what we were doing. Then again, maybe it just wasn't our day. But if Jesus' point in telling this parable is that God expects us to do our best with what God has given us, then the amount (monetary or otherwise) we are able to produce with it should be a concern secondary to the fact that we gave it our best shot. If our actions, and more importantly, our hearts, show that we truly recognize and are thankful for our God given gifts, then we won't hesitate to go out and boldly use them for God's glory and the ultimate benefit of God's kingdom here on earth.

November 23 (Reign of Christ)

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100;
Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

Reign of Christ Sunday is the final Sunday before the beginning of Advent, and thus the new lectionary year. So perhaps it's fitting to cap off Year A with one of the most direct and challenging passages in the gospel, if not in the whole Bible.

Most of the time when we talk about Jesus reigning in our lives, we talk about it in terms of individual, personal salvation. "Have you, as an individual, accepted Jesus?" we ask. I've seen a tract illustrating the two types of lives one can lead: one drawing had the individual sitting on the throne of his or her life, the other had Jesus on the throne and the person bowing down. All you had to do to move from the former to the latter was pray and prayer. It was as simple as that!

The thing is, though, that this hardly the biblical picture of what it is to have Jesus reigning in our lives. When Jesus talks about how the sheep and the goats will be separated out in the final judgment, he doesn't tell the sheep they prayed the right prayer, and the goats that they drank too much and watched too many R-rated movies.

The essential difference between the sheep and the goats is the care they showed for other people, especially those the world considers "the least of these." How did they react when they saw those to whom they owed nothing, according to the world's standards? Did they step over the homeless person and tell them to get a job? Did they tell the person dying of AIDS that they were paying the price for their sins? Did they insist that those in jail deserved to live in cruel and inhumane conditions because of their crimes? Or did they look at each of these people and see not a drag on society or someone who hadn't made something of themselves, but a precious child of God in need of care and compassion?

Whenever someone preaches about Matthew 25 as if it is Jesus' actual criteria for being a Christian, most Protestants get nervous because it starts to sound like works righteousness. It kind of sounds like we're saying that you can earn your way into Heaven with enough good works. It can be very

easy to sound that way, but it misses the essential point of what Jesus is talking about.

For a moment let's set aside the "eternal fire" and "eternal punishment" language and assume for a moment that Heaven and Hell are not the issues here (even though they may well be). The sheep are receiving their reward because they have been participating in the reality of the Kingdom of God all along. They have lived by the rules of the Kingdom that says that no one is beneath anyone else, and that everyone gets a seat at the table. So now that this Kingdom of God is fully consummated, they are able to fully see that in which they have trusted even though the rest of the world has been operating by a different set of rules. The goats, on the other hand, are so fully committed to the system that has been phased out, their lives are so oriented around the idea of scarcity and endless consumption that living in a Kingdom where the rules are fundamentally at odds with what they're used to that they're miserable. In other words, Heaven is wonderful for the sheep, but it's hellish for the goats.

On Reign of Christ Sunday, as on most Sundays, there are lots of churches that end their services with invitations to come up to the front and accept Jesus in to your heart, to let Christ reign in your life. If your church is one of those churches, consider setting that aside for this one Sunday. Instead of inviting people forward to accept Jesus, invite them to head out the door and look for Jesus everywhere they go. Is Jesus holding a cardboard sign by the freeway exit? Is Jesus all alone in a run down nursing home? Is Jesus right in front of their face, but they've grown so desensitized that they stare straight through him?

If Christ really does reign in our hearts, then let us go out to love him and serve him wherever he may be.



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