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Pentecost 23

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Pulpits of Peace, Not Politics”

Text: Matthew 22:15-21 (Isaiah 45:1-7; 1 Thess 1:1-10)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Three weeks ago, on Sunday September 28th, thirty-one pastors in twenty-some states got up in their pulpits and endorsed one of the candidates running for president. They did so specifically to challenge the IRS, which prohibits such activity if your church desires to keep its tax exempt status. But these pastors think that prohibition violates their first amendment right to free speech and so they decided to provoke the IRS in the hopes that they could get this prohibition overturned, even fighting this battle all the way to the Supreme Court, if necessary. I haven't yet heard if anything is going to come of this or not.

What is interesting to me is the debate that has gone on regarding this, most of which has focused on the Constitution and what it says and how you interpret it. But you know what? This is not a Constitutional issue. This is not a matter of the separation of church and state. And it really has nothing to do with taxes. In fact, what a pastor says from his pulpit is an issue that spans every country and every form of government, in every time and place - even long before there was a United States Constitution. **Because when a pastor steps into his pulpit, he does not have the right of free speech; this is something he willingly gives up.** For he is not there speaking for himself, or as a citizen of any country, but as a representative and ambassador of Christ. He may only speak what he has been given to speak as an undershepherd of the Good Shepherd, and anything else is out of place and out of line - not because the government says so, but because God says so! This is the place for His Word alone. Not what I *think* God is saying to me now, in my heart - but what He has said in His sure and certain Word. *For this is the place where a holy God speaks to His holy people the forgiveness of sins which makes them holy.* And any other word, that offers any other hope, or that has any other agenda, is not the Word of the Lord, the true God, but the word of a false god, and therefore idolatry.

If those are strong words, perhaps they need to be, in a world where what the church does and what the church is for has become so confused. And it is not a new problem - the Pharisees and Herodians tried to challenge Jesus and get Him mixed up on the wrong end of the IRS also. ***“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caezar, or***

*not?"* they asked Jesus that day. But Jesus wouldn't step into their trap. The kingdom of the church and the kingdom of the state are both God-given kingdoms under God's authority. Both are good, yet with different responsibilities. Both are used by God, but in different ways and for different reasons. And it is important to keep their realms distinct. And so, Jesus says, ***"give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."***

Now clearly, taxes, among other things, are given to Caesar and belong to the state. The question for us today is: what is it that we give to God, that is rightfully His? St. Paul gives us the answer when he told the congregation in Thessalonica: ***"We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."*** Paul was praising the Thessalonians here because they were giving to God what He wanted: their faith, hope, and love. A faith which trusts in Jesus for all things, a confident hope in His work now and in the future, and a love which overflows from faith in service towards our neighbor. Where these are right the heart is at peace. Where these are wrong there can be no peace.

And that is the danger of bringing any other word into the pulpit that belongs to Jesus alone - it robs us of the peace and hope that is our in Christ Jesus by offering us false gods and false hope. For it is not the right president, or a good supreme court, or better laws and reforms enacted in our country that are going to solve our problems. There is a far deeper and greater problem that has caused all of our problems - and you know what it is: *our sin*. Laws can ban guns, but can do nothing about the violence and hatred in our hearts. Laws can limit abortions, but can do nothing about the murder and lust in our hearts. And laws can regulate financial dealings, but can do nothing about the greed and selfishness in our hearts. And so while the law is good (as even St. Paul affirms), and has its place, it is limited; it can only do so much; and we dare not ever place our hope in the law or in governments.

And so pastors, as pastors, are not to be about politics, but if they are faithful stewards, about one thing only: they are to faithfully dispense the Lord's gifts to His bride, the church. To you. To give you life and hope in the forgiveness of your sins. A pastor that speaks any other word is a thief and a robber - for he is robbing you of the gifts, the joy, the hope, the life, and the forgiveness of Jesus, that Jesus wants given to you here. These gifts that Jesus earned for you on the cross, and that He has placed in His word, water, bread, and wine, here, for you. For this Saviour and these gifts are the only thing that can save us from a world gone mad, from a constantly attacking satan, and from the sin in each of us that keeps dragging us down and diverting our eyes from Christ. From the pulpit is to sound forth the voice that cuts through all the false gods and false hopes in this world - that we often

wrongly put our faith in - and proclaim to us a Saviour, here for us. That you and me and all people put our faith in Him alone.

That is what Isaiah did in his day, from his pulpit. In his words spoken to us today he foretold of a time when a King Cyrus was going to rise in power and release the people of Israel from their captivity and exile, that they may return to their land. But in King Cyrus they were not to put their hope! This was all done so ***“that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity. I am the Lord, who does all these things.”*** The Lord does all these things - *giving both well-being and calamity* - to this end: that all may turn to Him and live. That we turn from our idols, and receive His forgiveness and life.

*So what are they for you?* The idols that you are clinging to and need to turn from? Those people or things you think will give you life but which, in fact, are robbing you of life? That which you love more than your Saviour, or fear more than your Lord, or trust more than your Father? That to which you look for the answers to your problems, or for hope for the future? What are they for you? . . . **Repent.** And today and everyday, **cling instead to Him who clings to you.** To Him who does not reject you for your sins, but who came and took your human flesh as His own. The Son of God who came and was born as your brother, Jesus, to do what no one else - politician or pastor - could: die for your sins and then rise from the dead. That your sins and their penalty be dead and buried once and for all, and you be raised to a new life as sons of God. *And that is what you are, for it is what He has made you.*

For the Gospel that is given to you here is *powerful*. The Gospel is not like the grandiose words and promises of political campaigns, telling you of what they hope they *will* do - the Gospel is words telling you what *has been done* by your Saviour, and is now given to you here. For here the image of God is restored in you. Here the name of Jesus is inscribed upon your head and your heart. Here the body and blood of your Saviour is placed into your mouths and poured over your lips. And you are forgiven your sins, raised from the dead, and given a new life. For you belong to your Saviour, who created you *and* redeemed you. And so **to give to God what is God's** is to give Him yourself - to trust in Him as your Father, and to live as His child.

And so what the Law and governments are unable to do your Saviour has done. For while the Law can only change the actions of the outside, it is Jesus who gets to the heart of the matter - *your heart* - creating in you a clean heart and giving you His Spirit, to guide and direct and sanctify you all the days of your life. That you rely and trust and live only in Him. For **He is the Lord and there is no other.** He is your

life, and there is no other.

So with election day coming up in a couple of weeks, vote - elect the best president and other officials that you can. ***Give to Caesar what is Caesar's*** - but do not give him what is God's alone. That no matter who wins the elections, your faith, hope, and love remain unshaken. For not in mere men is our faith and hope, but in the God-man, our Saviour Jesus Christ, the King of kings. And nothing is hopeless when your hope is in Him.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.