

Sermon October 18, 2020

“Who Receives Our Allegiance”

I was just 16 when I saw a movie that has always stayed with me. I hope some of you have seen it, and if not, I encourage you to look for it. The movie is “A Man for all Seasons,” the story of the deadly conflict between England’s King Henry VIII and his Lord Chancellor Sir Thomas More.

The Lord Chancellor at that time was called “the king’s conscience.” He was appointed by the king as the chief royal chaplain and advised the king in both spiritual and secular matters. In the 1530’s King Henry wanted to have his marriage with Catherine of Aragon annulled by the Catholic church because she seemed unable to give birth to a healthy male heir. King Henry wanted to try his chances with Anne Boleyn, but the Pope refused his request for an annulment. King Henry was so angry that he broke with the Pope and named himself head of the new Church of England.

All the government officials in England backed the King, all except Sir Thomas More. He refused to sign the letter the King sent to the Pope.

I was able to find a website that includes dialogue from the movie, “A Man for all Seasons,” to share with you. Here is a conversation between the King and Sir Thomas:

King Henry: Never saw the hand of God so clear in anything. It’s my bound duty to put away the Queen, and all the popes back to Peter shall not come between me and my duty! How is it that you cannot see? Everyone else does.”

Sir Thomas: “Then why does your Grace need my poor support?”

King Henry: “Because you’re honest... and what is more to the purpose, you’re KNOWN to be honest. There are those who follow me because I wear the crown; and others who follow me because they are jackals with sharp teeth and I’m their tiger; there’s a mass that follows me because it follows anything that moves. And then there’s you...”

Each government official was then required to sign an oath of allegiance to the king. Sir Thomas resigned rather than sign the oath. But retirement wasn’t a safe retreat because King Henry still insisted he sign the oath.

After many refusals, Sir Thomas More was sentenced to death for failing to declare his loyalty to the King. In his final moments,

“Just before the axe falls, Sir Thomas says to the witnesses, “I am commanded by the King to be brief, and since I am the King’s obedient subject, brief I will be. I die his Majesty’s good servant but God’s first.”

There was another man who lived 1500 years earlier who also paid the ultimate price for refusing to give his allegiance to the state. Jesus’ crucifixion was a direct result of his confrontation and disregard for the ruling elite---both the temple leaders as well as the Roman government.

Today’s gospel message must have been especially infuriating to the officials Jesus spoke with because he answered with such wit and truthfulness that they had no comeback. He took the question about taxes and turned it on its head. [It’s never wise to humiliate your opponents.]

The taxation rules in Palestine were not just about collecting revenue for the government. Taxes were also a way of keeping the Romans in strict control of the Jews. The two groups who brought the question about paying taxes were the Pharisees and Herodians. Both groups were involved in political and economic deals with the Romans, so the stakes were high when talking about taxes. The people had to pay taxes or they would be hurt, and Jesus didn’t want to put the poorest people in danger by arguing that taxes should not be paid.

Of course, the real issue was not about taxes or money, but about who deserved the obedience and the loyalty of the people, Caesar or God.

We might think we are fortunate to live in a time when declaring our loyalty to God isn’t a question of life or death. Rarely are we involved in a decision that is so public and with such dire consequences.

But of course that isn’t true. We are regularly faced with having to make the most fundamental, important choice of our lives---to whom do we give our loyalty, our trust and our love. Because when we deny God, whether in public or private, we are choosing to deny the one who brings us life.

In modern times it is impossible to not live in both the spiritual and the secular worlds. Like the Jews under Rome, we too must pay taxes. We might not approve of everything the government does with our taxes, but they must be paid.

Yet our responsibilities don't end with writing the check for the taxes we owe. We must also play out our responsibilities to God. Because of our loyalty to God, we have a duty to make God's will done on earth. We work to bring the kingdom of God into our modern lives.

We are called to be active in our compassion---to make sure that people who the world ignores are taken care of. We are called to make sure each person is treated with justice. We are called to insure that all are recognized and honored as a person who bears the image of the Creator in his, or her, body.

We will each do different work as we follow in loyal obedience to God. We use our unique God given gifts to make the Prayer of St. Francis a reality.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, **let me sow love;**

where there is injury, **pardon;**

where there is doubt, **faith;**

where there is despair, **hope;**

where there is darkness, **light;**

where there is sadness, **joy.**