

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 22, 2017

Pledging Allegiance

Isaiah 45:1-7; Matthew 22:15-22

I know some of you are familiar with the story of the little boy
standing in the foyer of his church,
staring up a large bronze plaque
like the ones we have here in our sanctuary.

One Sunday morning,
the pastor noticed little Alex standing there, very still, very quiet,
staring up at the plaque.
It was covered with names
and had small American flags mounted on either side of it.
The seven year old had been standing there for some time,
so the pastor walked up, stood beside the little boy,
and said quietly, "Good morning, Alex."

"Good morning Pastor," he replied, still focused on the plaque.
"Pastor, what is this?" he asked.

The pastor said,
"Well, son, it's a memorial to all the young men and women
who died in the service."

Soberly, they just stood together, staring at the names.

Finally, little Alex,
in a voice barely audible and trembling with fear,
asked,
"Which service, Pastor?
The 8:45, or the 11:15?"

Cute story!
And one that could have happened in many churches in our land.
And it is interesting, isn't it, that we use the same word — "**service**" —
both for active duty in the military
and for time spent in worship in a sanctuary.

We will come back to these plaques,
and to the American flag in our sanctuary, in a moment,
and the different forms of service to which we may pledge ourselves,
but first we must attend to the fascinating pairing of texts
presented by today's lectionary.

The prophet Isaiah and the Gospel of Matthew
both raise interesting questions about how God is at work in the world,
particularly in the world of nations.

Isaiah proclaims,
*Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped
to subdue nations before him...*

Cyrus — just to be clear — was not a King of Israel.

Cyrus the Great ruled Persia from 558 to 530 BCE.
He established a vast empire that spanned the ancient Near East
and swaths of southwest and central Asia.
Cyrus's policy was to permit local cultural autonomy,
allowing conquered nations to worship in their accustomed ways.

So in 539, when Cyrus defeated the Babylonians,
he allowed their Judean captives to return home
and rebuild the ruined temple in Jerusalem.
(We heard a lot about this over the summer in our series on the Minor Prophets.)

Cyrus's tolerance of local worship
embodied a similar wisdom to our notion of the separation of church and state,
and was so appreciated by his subjects
that this Persian emperor came to be idealized in Jewish and Greek literature,
lauded as an unusually gifted and excellent ruler.
The ancient Greek historian Xenophon
described the king as handsome, generous, and devoted to learning.
Cyrus was lionized the world over as not just a great power,
but as a power for good.

So Isaiah portrays Cyrus
as an instrument of the Lord God of Israel, the One God.
In today's passage,
the Lord addresses Cyrus directly,
takes Cyrus by the hand and empowers him to deliver the Judean exiles
from their Babylonian captors.

Earlier in Isaiah,
Cyrus is called God's "shepherd"
and here, in verse 1, God's "anointed."
It is amazing to consider that this foreign king
is chosen by God
called by name, and anointed as God's instrument,
though Cyrus does not know *God's* name.

And remember, this word *anointed*
can be translated *messiah* in Hebrew, and *christos* in Greek.

Often in the Old Testament prophets,
God is said to work through the enemies of Israel
to punish God's people for their disobedience.
God even calls Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, "my servant." (Jer. 25:9, 27:6).

But here, God goes before Cyrus, and leads the Persian army into battle.
This is unprecedented, but the message is clear:
even in the machinations of foreign empires,
who do not acknowledge God's sovereignty in the least,
God is at work to accomplish God's purposes.
It may seem to be Cyrus the Great who is conquers,
"but the mighty God of Israel
moves behind the scenes of all that transpires."¹

The history of the Jewish people
is a history of being conquered and oppressed by the empires of the world.

The Assyrian empire gave way to the Babylonians,
the Babylonians gave way to the Persians,
the Persians were conquered by Alexander the Great...and so on...

In Jesus' time, it was the **Roman Empire** who had come to power.
In the days of the great **Caesar Augustus**,
the questions of power and freedom, of nations and rulers,
and the separation of religious worship and political allegiance
are still very much at play,
and provide the backdrop for the scene of this conflict
between Jesus
and the religious leaders who are trying to entrap him.

The Pharisees were more sectarian,
and would have resisted allegiance to Rome.
The Herodians we really don't know anything about.
But we presume, by their name, that they are more mainstream politically,
part of the political establishment, we might say,
aligning themselves with Herod Antipas,
the Roman puppet who rules over Galilee.

So these religious players seek to trap Jesus in a Catch-22, a no-win situation,
forcing him either to alienate the Jews who are oppressed by Caesar's tax,
or to foster sedition against Rome, by denying the obligation to pay the tax.

Jesus' ingenious response is one of his more famous lines,
but also a challenge to interpret:

Asking to see the coin used for the tax, a denarius (on the front of your bulletin)
Jesus asks, *Whose head is this, and whose title?*
They answered, "The emperor's"
Then he said to them,
"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's,
and to God the things that are God's."

When Jesus asks, *Whose head is this?*
the Greek is *eikon*, literally, *Whose image is this?*
The use of that word would remind any good Jew
that they are not created in the image of Caesar,
but in the **image of God**.

"They may pay the infamous poll tax, but they do not belong to the emperor.
They themselves belong to God.
And the declaration of that ultimate belonging has powerful implications."²

Jesus retort to his would-be accusers,
memorable as it may be,
does not unravel the complexities of the separation of church and state.

But it does state the crux of the matter.
Regardless of the particular political arena in which we live,
we are created in the image of God.
Our ultimate loyalty is always to God.
All other allegiances are penultimate,
and are subject to our first loyalty,
our first love.

To say this however, does not exempt us from other allegiances,
because we are not exempt from living in the real world of human relations.
Human life is political. It has to do with the use and abuse of power.
And justice calls for the balance of power.
To be human is to be involved in the game of politics,
like it or not.
To be of follower of Jesus is to know that our ultimate allegiance is to God,
and that, **like Jesus,**
we will be called upon again and again
to navigate our way among our other allegiances
in a way that honors our ultimate allegiance.

We become followers of Jesus by passing through the waters of baptism,
which we call a "sacrament."

But have you ever wondered why we call it that?

In Roman times,

the *sacramentum* was the oath taken by a soldier,
the oath of allegiance to serve Caesar,
and to give his life for the Roman empire, if called upon to do so.

This was the word chosen by the early church to describe what we are doing in Baptism.

In baptism, we take an oath of ultimate allegiance.

This has led some to ask whether a Christian can take any other oath,

such as the oath of public office,

or the oath of military service,

or for that matter, the pledge of allegiance to the American flag,

that is, the oath of citizenship in a nation of this world.

And yet, we do.

Or at least, many faithful Christians do, take these oaths.

And we honor their pledges, and others like them, here in our sanctuary.

We even acknowledge the pledge we have all made as American citizens

by the presence of our national flag here in the sanctuary.

I dare say that many of us have recently placed our hands over our hearts,

and perhaps removed a hat,

out of respect for the flag during either the pledge of allegiance,

or the national anthem.

And you'd have to have your head down in a hole in recent days

to have missed the public debate that is raging

about some NFL players who are choosing to kneel for the national anthem

in the exercise of their First Amendment rights,

as a sign of protest to certain injustices they see in our nation.

It is interesting, to say the least, what an affront this is to some,

given the way our honoring of the flag has changed over the years.

The pledge of allegiance was first written by Francis Bellamy,

a Christian socialist minister, in the 1890's —

yes, written by a socialist. You can look it up.

Originally, the proper sign of allegiance was intended to be a sort of military salute,

and on the words "to the Flag" the hand was extended with palm upraised.

Soon after that,

the sign was changed to the hand being extended with palm facing downward.

Yes, in America.

But, as you can imagine,

in the 1930's and 40's, with the rise of Nazi Germany,

Americans saw what can come of an unthinking, un-self-critical nationalism,

and we wanted to distance ourselves from that sort of allegiance.

So in 1942, the US Flag Code instructed civilian saluters

to put their hands over their hearts.

Sometimes change comes for good reason.

It is a fair question to ask,
whether a Christian should ever pledge allegiance to anyone or anything other than God,
and how, in doing so,
we might avoid the charge of idolatry.

For most of Christian history,
the answer has been to acknowledge that we have little choice but to participate
in a world of multiple allegiances.
More than that, we are **called** to love our neighbor as ourselves,
which means involving ourselves with our neighbors,
and this always involve some with more power and some with less,
and therefore cannot be apolitical.

And the biblical witness
is that God is powerfully at work in and through all things,
including the nations of the earth,
and even secular leaders, regardless of their profession of faith.
**Even the worst of secular leaders can become God's instruments
despite themselves.**

So Jesus says,
*Give to Caesar that which is Caesar's
and to God that which is God's...*

And he leaves to us the lifelong challenge...
...to the millennia-long challenge...
...of **navigating** our multiple allegiances...

...but he would have us remember that all of our commitments to service
are subject to our **one ultimate commitment** to service,
the service of God,
who is revealed in Jesus Christ,
our highest *sacramentum*.

So whether you remove your hat,
or put your hand over your heart,
or salute,
or kneel,
or something else entirely,
in regard to your lesser allegiances,
it is to Christ that we pledge
our ultimate allegiance.

And in that knowledge
we, too, should be amazed as we leave here
and go on our way.

¹ Carolyn J. Sharp, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 170-175. All material on Isaiah's interpretation of Cyrus adapted from Sharp's commentary.

² Charles B. Cousar, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year A* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 532-533.