

Sermon for Proper 24A
Sunday, October 22, 2023
“Community”

Texts: Matthew 22:15-22; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” We have arrived at the time of the year when many churches focus their attention on stewardship campaigns and like to talk about money. But today’s readings direct our attention to something much more important to being the church than money; first and foremost the church is committed to nurturing and maintaining good relationships. Today’s readings have a lot to say about the intersection of our lives as Christian people and our lives in the world as it is.

In Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians, he wrote to the church. The church that Paul was writing to back then was quite different from the church as we know it today. They didn’t worship in beautiful towering and stately buildings. The earliest Christians generally couldn’t meet publicly because they were constantly under the threat of persecution. Rather, they met in houses; they met in fields; they met on seashores; they met wherever the community hung out and wherever they could find a safe place to gather. The *ekklesia*, as it was called, was the assembly—the gathering together of people who were called out with a common mission of faith, hope and love, as stated in the passage, and to proclaim the good news Jesus Christ throughout the world. The church was all about a community of people gathering together; even Paul did not write this letter by himself, but with the collaboration of his companions Silas and Timothy. Paul reminded the community of that the grace available in Christ Jesus—the free gift of salvation through him—was a deep, inner peace that comes only from deep relationship with God. Paul knew that one of the primary functions of the church was to nurture relationships: the relationship between the members of the assembly, relationships among the believers in Thessalonica, and the relationship between the individual believer and God, through Jesus Christ.

We are the church. We are the *ekklesia*. We are the community called out to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to each other and to the world. We cannot be a community by ourselves; we exist because we are in relationship with each other. We don’t experience the fullness of our humanity without being in relationship with one another, because that enables us to experience the fullness of God. We gather together here to ask the Lord’s blessing, to hear the Word of God, to be comforted by the presence of God, and to be fed by the Body and Blood of Christ. That gives us the strength to go out into the world and proclaim the good news in our lives—to share how God lives and moves within us and among us.

If we’re going to think about what our commitment to our *ekklesia*, we first have to take an inventory of how it connects to us and how we connect to it. What does All Saints Church in Woodhaven mean to you; how does it impact your life and how do you impact its life and its ministry.

Of course, what we do inside here is important. The words of today's psalm remind us that we are to worship the Lord in the beauty of his holiness. We tremble before him, not because we are afraid of God, but because after we've been in his presence, we should be so overcome with excitement that we should be trembling with joy. We want you to feel that way every time you leave this place. And your excitement should inspire you to immediately go and tell it out among the nations that the Lord is King. We gather here to honor God, and afterward, we continue to honor him as we conduct our lives in the real world.

So when we hear the words of Jesus, as we did in today's gospel, when he said, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's," he, too, is speaking about the relationships his followers are supposed to have in day-to-day life. There is a saying: "There are two things we can't avoid: death and taxes." Even Jesus knew this reality. Jesus recognized the importance of being in good relationship with one's neighbor—even Caesar is our neighbor and the civic world is our community. Jesus reinforced that Jewish believers of his time had a responsibility to give money appropriately to the support of their temple and, as people living in the Roman Empire, their responsibility to support the state. We may not like having to pay taxes or bills or listen to the seemingly unending conversations about who's running for what public office, but they are the realities of living in the world. As much as we must pay attention to our spiritual lives, we need to be responsible and pay attention in our civic lives, as well. We must be good citizens and we must be good Christians. As good Christians, we must always love our neighbors, treat them with respect, and understand that just because someone's life experience isn't yours, they still matter and they're still a child of God. We must be good citizens, fulfill our obligations, pay our bills, yes, pay our taxes—no matter who "Caesar" might be—and vote for responsible leaders. As Christian citizens, we must stand up for justice and equality, too.

But here in our *ekklesia*, this gathering of diverse folk that is All Saints Church, we must also nurture our relationship with each other and the church's relationship to us. This year as an essential component of our efforts to address stewardship, your leadership—that is your vestry, wardens, and rector—want to know how this place is impacting your life. When you come here to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, do you leave trembling with excitement and joy? When you think about how this community impacts your life, are you being fed? And what do you need this community to be for you? What would you like to see happening here? These are some of the questions we will be asking you as we invite you to think about how you relate to All Saints and how All Saints relates to you.

Relationships matter. Community matters. As the church, the *ekklesia*, the assembly called out to be proclaimers of the good news of Jesus Christ, we are to be imitators of Christ by doing all we can to maintain our relationships and community, wherever it needs to happen—out in the world, or in our precious sacred space, on Sunday, and during the rest of the week. We are called to be good stewards of our relationships, whether they be with those who lead us, those who love us, those whom we love, the church, ourselves, or God. "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Amen.

Resources

Feasting on the Word for Proper 24 (Year A, Volume 4)

SermonWriter, http://www.lectionary.org/EXEG_Engl_WEB/NT/13-1Thess-WEB/1Thess.1.1-10.EXEGESIS.htm

Working Preacher, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2222