

OCTOBER 22, 2023
TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY
AFTER PENTECOST
"TRUTH"



ST. JOHN UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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***RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

Inspired by Exodus 33:12-23

One: Let us worship the Holy One who forms us as a people, a community, and a world!

Many: God knows our name and looks upon us with pleasure.

One: Let us hear, see, and know the ways of the Lord.

Many: God reveals Godself to us in magnificent and gentle ways.

One: Let us proclaim the glory, goodness, and graciousness of our Great God!

Many: God is worthy to be praised!

***PRAYER OF INVOCATION:**

Revealing God, you show us the way of life, lead us with love, and move us to compassion. May our hearts be transformed by your Spirit and by your Truth. Let our actions and attitudes demonstrate your kingdom. May justice and peace be our hope. Let repair, restoration, and reconciliation be our aim. Make your presence among us known. Let us prepare to receive it. Amen.

***CALL TO CONFESSION:**

We are invited to reflect on the wrongs we have done, the good we have neglected and the motives that underlie our behavior. What are the idols that attract us, the responsibilities we seek to avoid, the schemes by which we pursue selfish advantages? God knows, but we need to recognize and confess them.

***PRAYER FOR TRANSFORMATION AND NEW LIFE:**

Righteous One, forgive us for all the ways our hearts have been hardened. Forgive us for every time we chose to reflect the ways, attitudes, and values of this world rather than your kingdom. Forgive us for turning away from the brokenness of our world

when it becomes too uncomfortable. Forgive us for being timid when you empower us to be bold, for being resigned when you have created us to be resolute, for being complicit when you have charged us to be transformative. Help us to walk in your image and your path of righteousness, courageousness, and loving kindness. Amen.

***WORDS OF GRACE:**

Beloved, remember that you do not walk this journey alone. The Comforter and Advocate accompanies you and equips you for the ministry of abundant love that shows up, speaks up, and acts up in the name of Jesus. Know that your life and your witness make a difference. God is faithful to forgive and enables us to do the impossible and be the unimaginable.

***GLORIA:**

Glory to the Creator, and the Christ and the Spirit so near. As it was from the start so it shall be forever, One God always here. (repeat two more times.) (end) One God always here. One God always here.

SCRIPTURE LESSONS: Exodus 33:12-23

Moses pleads with God

¹² Moses said to the LORD, “Look, you’ve been telling me, ‘Lead these people forward.’ But you haven’t told me whom you will send with me. Yet you’ve assured me, ‘I know you by name and think highly of you.’ ¹³ Now if you do think highly of me, show me

your ways so that I may know you and so that you may really approve of me. Remember too that this nation is your people.”

¹⁴ The LORD replied, “I’ll go myself, and I’ll help you.”

¹⁵ Moses replied, “If you won’t go yourself, don’t make us leave here. ¹⁶ Because how will anyone know that we have your special approval, both I and your people, unless you go with us? Only that distinguishes us, me and your people, from every other people on the earth.”

¹⁷ The LORD said to Moses, “I’ll do exactly what you’ve asked because you have my special approval, and I know you by name.”

¹⁸ Moses said, “Please show me your glorious presence.”

¹⁹ The LORD said, “I’ll make all my goodness pass in front of you, and I’ll proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD.’ I will be kind to whomever I wish to be kind, and I will have compassion to whomever I wish to be compassionate. ²⁰ But,” the LORD said, “you can’t see my face because no one can see me and live.” ²¹ The LORD said, “Here is a place near me where you will stand beside the rock. ²² As my glorious presence passes by, I’ll set you in a gap in the rock, and I’ll cover you with my hand until I’ve passed by. ²³ Then I’ll take away my hand, and you will see my back, but my face won’t be visible.”

EPISTLE LESSON: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Greeting

1 From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. To the Thessalonians' church that is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace and peace to all of you.

Thanksgiving to God

²We always thank God for all of you when we mention you constantly in our prayers. ³This is because we remember your work that comes from faith, your effort that comes from love, and your perseverance that comes from hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father.

⁴Brothers and sisters, you are loved by God, and we know that he has chosen you. ⁵We know this because our good news didn't come to you just in speech but also with power and the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know as well as we do what kind of people we were when we were with you, which was for your sake. ⁶You became imitators of us and of the Lord when you accepted the message that came from the Holy Spirit with joy in spite of great suffering.

⁷As a result you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. ⁸The message about the Lord rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place. The news about your faithfulness to God has spread so that we don't even need to mention it.

⁹People tell us about what sort of welcome we had from you and how you turned to God from idols. As a

result, you are serving the living and true God, ¹⁰and you are waiting for his Son from heaven. His Son is Jesus, who is the one he raised from the dead and who is the one who will rescue us from the coming wrath.

***GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 22:15-22**

Question about taxes

¹⁵Then the Pharisees met together to find a way to trap Jesus in his words. ¹⁶They sent their disciples, along with the supporters of Herod, to him. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are genuine and that you teach God's way as it really is. We know that you are not swayed by people's opinions, because you don't show favoritism. ¹⁷So tell us what you think: Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

¹⁸Knowing their evil motives, Jesus replied, "Why do you test me, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used to pay the tax." And they brought him a denarion. ²⁰"Whose image and inscription is this?" he asked.

²¹"Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." ²²When they heard this they were astonished, and they departed.

These are the ancient words revealed to us anew.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

MESSAGE: “Trick Questions. Witty Answers.”

Up to this point we have seen Jesus, as it were, on the attack. He had spoken three parables in which he had plainly indicted the orthodox Jewish leaders. In the parable of the two sons, the Jewish leaders appear under the guise of the unsatisfactory son who did not do his father’s will. In the parable of the wicked tenants, these same Jewish leaders represent the wicked tenants. In the parable of the king’s feast, they are the condemned guests.

Now we see the Jewish leaders launching their counter-attack; and they do so by directing at Jesus carefully formulated questions. They ask these questions in public, while the crowd look on and listen, and their aim is to make Jesus discredit himself by his own words in the presence of the people. Here, then, we have the question of the Pharisees, and it was subtly framed. Palestine was an occupied country, and the Jews were subject to the Roman Empire; and the question was: “Is it, or is it not, lawful to pay tribute to Rome?” In other words, to pay taxes to Caesar who claimed to be god, as opposed to the Jews believing that the God of Abraham was the only true God.

To me, this question to Jesus was sort of like, “Do you STILL cheat when playing cards?” How does an honest person answer that? So, to raise this question about paying taxes to the emperor was to pull the

scab off a political and theological wound, which is exactly what Jesus’ questioners did.

Jesus, however, was aware of the treachery of his interrogators, and he cleverly sidestepped their snare. He asked them for one of the tax coins and, when they produced one, he asked them whose image it bore. When they answered, “the emperor’s,” he stated, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s”.

When Jesus asks them for the tax coin, they unsuspectingly reach into their purses and withdraw the evidence that exposes them – not him – as deceptive and hypocritical compromisers. They are the ones carrying around Caesar’s money, not Jesus; they are the ones who have the emperor’s image in their pocketbooks; they are the ones who have already bought into the pagan system.

Jesus’s reply to their trick question really means these words from Christ, “Everybody has to decide between Caesar and God. No one can serve two masters. You seem to have made your decision, forged your convenient compromise. But what about your obligation to God? Render to God what belongs to God. Choose this day whom you will serve.”

Before I sit down, I just want to say a few words about taxes. In the time of Jesus, the people did not know where their money went; there was no transparency.

Perhaps the money went to pay for the soldiers and guards who could kill them at any moment. Or perhaps the money went to the emperor or his wife to dress them in the finest robes possible.

Today everyone gets a little ruffled when you mention the word “taxes”. Now I’m not a tax expert but I believe some of our taxes goes to safe roads, highways, and bridges, schools, local administrators who take care of local issues. Some goes to parks, police officers, fire men, libraries, etc. I’m grateful for all those things made possible by our taxes and, yes, I do try to avoid them at all costs, as long as it’s legal and I don’t cheat at cards. Amen

PASTORAL PRAYER:

God of all things good and beautiful, we come to you this morning with much in our thoughts and much on our hearts. We worry about our broken world. We are consumed with sadness when we hear about schools and hospitals being bombed. We are consumed with worry about those people thousands of miles away who have no food, no water, no power, no shelter. We don’t understand how and why people do such atrocities to others. War solves nothing. We feel helpless to change things. All we can do is pray that some how, some way, some time, hearts and heads will realize that war is not the way to solve problems of misunderstanding, miscommunication, misinterpretation, and prejudice.

In the meantime, we keep praying.

We pray for those closer to home who need to feel your love, gracious God. They are lonely, depressed, hurting physically or mentally, facing a bad diagnosis and are frightened. Send your Holy Spirit to each of them and to all the people on our prayer list, that they may feel comfort and hopeful when things seem hopeless. Thank you, steadfast God, for listening to our prayers, our sorrows, and our joys. We pray in the name of your Son.

THE LORD’S PRAYER:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

INVITATION TO GENEROSITY:

Psalm 96:3 exhorts us to “Declare God’s glory among the nations, God’s marvelous works among all the peoples.” Let us glorify God through generous living and faithful use of the resources entrusted to our care. Let us marvel at the Creator’s provision by affirming that we have more than enough to share for the benefit and care of our community, world, and God’s church.

***UNISON PRAYER OF DEDICATION AND
THANKSGIVING:**

**Generous God, we thank you for the gifts we receive
and for the gifts we give. May they serve to make
your kingdom come and your will be done. Magnify
their impact so that you may be glorified and your
name be praised. Amen.**

***BENEDICTION:**

May truth gentle your heart.

May truth find itself in your speech.

May truth guide your actions and attitudes.

May truth release you to be fully you.

May truth compel you to greater love and
compassion.

May truth fortify you as you go into the world as
God's agent of healing and hope.

Live in truth, go in peace,

Be love.

In the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

PRAYER LIST: Steve Miller, Carson Edwards, Yvonne
Weber, Marilyn Paul, Syd Safriet, Ronald Bopp,
Rosemary Williams, Becky Ballard, David Seneczyn,
Urban Baum, Amy Smith, Midge, Dawn Cipponeri,
Jackie Canterbury, and all the care givers who stand
beside these people.