



10/18/2020 Allegiance to God Alone
Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96:1-13; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

Wherever I traveled, I happened to notice that the local currency is usually impressed with images that are significant to the culture, geography or history of that place. On our coins and bills we have pictures of US presidents and other historical figures who have contributed to the formation of our nation. A penny pictures Lincoln; a nickel, Jefferson; a dime, Franklin Roosevelt; a quarter depicts George Washington and so on. Each of these images together with other symbols of American culture connect people to common treasures that reinforce the national spirit.

Roman coins were no different. The head of Caesar on the coin represented the national unity under the authority of the emperor. Commerce, military protection, urban development, and taxation were initiated and executed according to the national plan of the head of state. Anything in opposition to that was considered sedition and treason. Jesus was aware of that.

He did not fall in the trap the Herodians and Pharisees had sprung on him. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." was his remarkable response. He recognized that as social beings we are organized in political governments designed to look after the common good.

He also realized that governments are not necessarily always benign but at times may be corrupt and illegitimate. Under the booth of the Roman occupier, the people had had their share of suffering. But Jesus wasn't going to join the voices that called for active resistance and open rebellion. He had suggested non-violent ways of resistance to abuse and violence earlier on in his message.¹

But at this point, his recommendation to give both to Caesar and to God was not intended as a token and peace offering. It was intended to challenge the Jews' understanding of God's sovereignty: if God created the world and everything in it, what doesn't belong to God?

What Jesus wanted his challengers to see was the need for a total and radical orientation toward God. If one's life is not lived in the presence of God, is that life? If one's mouth does not sing the praises of God, what's the use of opening it?² If my words are not spoken in love, then my lips better stay sealed. If my hands and feet are not building the kingdom of God, what are they building? Who am I? What am I about? What am I for? Whose head is on my coin, where is my treasure?³

At the time of our baptism, we all have had the symbol of the cross marked on our forehead: that symbol ties us to Jesus, our Savior. He is the authority to whom we owe

¹ Matthew 5:39+

² Psalm 51:14

³ Romans 1:1-7; 7:4; 1 Corinthians 3:16-23; 2 Corinthians 4:6-8; Matthew 6:21



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allegiance. We belong to the Triune God, Maker of heaven and Earth, of all that is seen and unseen.

Our full and honest participation in the kingdom is an act of worship: our acknowledgment that God is truly our God is made tangible in the ways we treat one another. We bow to God alone and regret any ego-centered choice in life that deny God, neglects care of our neighbor, and abuses creation.

We publicly affirm our faith and commitment to love God alone when we gather as a community of believers. To gather for worship is a political act. It reminds us that our ultimate allegiance is to God rather than to any earthly authority. Created in the image of God, we offer our entire selves in the service of God and for the sake of the world.

We are entitled to our political views and party affiliation, yet allegiance to God supersedes all of that. We may celebrate our culture and fly our national flag, yet the cross of Christ who shows ultimate love for all world sinners comes first and above any of that.

Because we love God, we respond in generosity and empathy in favor of those who suffer.

In his *Freedom of a Christian*, Martin Luther explained what true worship really means. He writes: "This is the highest worship of God: To bestow on God truthfulness and righteousness and whatever else ought to be ascribed to the One in whom a person trusts. Here the soul submits itself to what God wishes; here it hallows God's name and allows itself to be treated according to God's good pleasure. This is because, clinging to God's promises, the soul does not doubt that God is true, righteous, and wise—the One who will do, arrange, and care for everything in the best possible way. Is not such a soul completely obedient to God in all things by this very faith? What commandment remains that such obedience has not completely fulfilled? What fulfillment is fuller than obedience in every situation? However, not works but faith alone offers this obedience."⁴

Here at Nativity, we have offered ourselves to God and we demonstrate that not only through our monetary offerings but through our gifts and talents as well. In fact, our offerings are not just monetary but are manifold.

Even though our ministry operations are limited due to the coronavirus, we still run the Food Pantry, some are still involved with making quilts to be shipped around the world, and some others are still working on hygiene kits for girls to be sent overseas. Because of your care in providing seeds and goats for Haiti, impoverished people can somehow

⁴ https://www.elca500.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Freedom-of-a-Christian_final-proof_3.17.20201.pdf



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survive an extremely challenging time of joblessness, violence and political upheaval during the pandemic.

We are church together and care for one another. We rejoice when members of the body of Christ make progress in the kingdom and it is nice to know that we have contributed to that progress.

The quilts that some of you make, get collected together with quilts made in so many other Lutheran churches and then shipped all around the world. We have some good news from Beirut: Three 40-foot shipping containers filled with thousands of mission quilts and school, personal and baby care kits, which reported as destroyed in the August 4th explosions at the port of Beirut, Lebanon, have been found intact.

It took several weeks for Lutheran World Relief's partner to gain access to the port area where the containers were stored. While some of our partners shipping containers were heavily damaged, it appears that the three containers containing the quilts and kits were stored behind a concrete block building, a spot that protected them from the blast. The quilts and kits have been transferred to a warehouse, from where they will be distributed to refugees living in Lebanon, principally from Syria and the Palestinian territories.

In addition to distributing the quilts and kits, Lutheran World Relief (LWR) is also working to address immense shelter needs in the wake of the explosion, helping poorer families to repair and return to their homes. It is on our behalf and with our support that LWR is able to do that.

With Christ's Spirit swelling our heart with joy, we are ready to lift every voice and sing a new song unto the Lord. May our every action be done to the glory of God. Amen.