Written by Pastor Tammy Craker Plentywood Lutheran Church (and a Packer fan)

All month we have been eavesdropping on Jesus as he was telling parables in the temple in Jerusalem. To set the scene it is still the day after Jesus’ ride into the city on a donkey as the people praised him, saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” When he first got to the temple that day, he threw out the moneychangers for making God’s house a “den of robbers.”

 Now it is the next day and he was back in the temple teaching the people when the temple authorities, the chief priests, the Pharisees, and the elders began to give him a hard time. You see, Jesus was not conforming to the ways they had, over the years, come to practice their faith. So they asked him by whose authority he had to do the things he did and to teach the things he taught.

 Jesus would not tell them and so started a series of parables. Jesus used these stories to show them who God was and what living in the kingdom of God was like. The temple authorities soon began to understand they were often cast as the ones who just didn’t get it. At times they were even the bad guys.

 When the Pharisees had heard enough, they left Jesus and talked amongst themselves about a way to trick Jesus into saying something that would upset the people. They wanted the people to stop following him so they could go back to life as usual. The life where the people listened to and followed them.

 However, the Pharisees were not the only ones who wanted Jesus gone. This group called the Herodians are somewhat of an unknown. They are not mentioned outside of the Gospels. It is safe to say with the name Herod, they were political and against Jesus. It is also true they would not have liked the Pharisees either, but here they are working together to get rid of Jesus.

 It is hard for us to imagine people not liking Jesus. But most everything Jesus did was against the culture and the powerful people, either political or within the temple. He was a threat to all they knew and all the power they held. They were not willing to give all of that up without a fight.

 The flattery they used when they approached Jesus is very obvious and almost amusing. Even the flattery was a comment on the way Jesus acted. “For you do not regard people with partiality” was a dig at Jesus’ way of not giving those who have the honor in society, meaning themselves, any favoritism like they were used to getting from people.

 The question they asked Jesus was shorter than the meaningless flattery. However short it was, it was meant to give Jesus no easy way out. Like if someone asked me, “Have you always hated the Packers?” If I say, “Yes” that would mean I hate the Packers and if I say, “No” that would imply at some point in time I did hate the Packers. It is a lose-lose situation.

 They asked Jesus, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” For Jesus it was a lose-lose situation. If Jesus had said, “Yes” he would have contradicted all he had ever said about giving all you have: heart, soul, strength and mind to God and the people would feel they had been disillusioned by Jesus and they would stop following him.

 If he had said, “No” he would appear to be against the empire and perhaps have been too radical for the people. Following him would mean they would risk arrest by the government, and they would stop following him.

 For Jesus this was not an “all or nothing” question. He knew, as did the religious leaders, the government was a part of their everyday life. So he asks them to show him the coin used for this tax in question.

This coin was different than the coins that should have been in the temple. Remember the money changers? Their job was to exchange the Roman coinage for the half shekel any Jewish man over the age of twenty was to pay for a temple tax. Yet the Pharisees seemed to have no problem finding a Roman coin.

 The Roman coin, the one used to pay taxes to the emperor, had an image of the emperor on it. So Jesus took one look at the image of the emperor on the coin and declared, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.” This answer stumped the Pharisees and the Herodians and they went away, amazed and defeated.

 We are left to wonder as well, just what things are God’s? In Genesis we understand God created everything that exists. However, that is an “all or nothing” answer and that is not life. Our lives are filled with gray, a mix of our beliefs and our experiences. As children of God, created in the image of God we are to live in two worlds: God’s kingdom and our present real world of time and space, filled with all kinds of authorities calling for our loyalty.

 We are not called to be of the world. But we are called to be in the world. We are called to live in the messiness that is the world, and we are to live **strongly holding** on to our belief that Jesus has given us the kingdom of heaven in his life, death, resurrection and ascension.

 When we live that way, often times we are at odds with the empire, meaning the powers of the world. Powers that are not just political but can include the way the world is going in *Quote* “normal society” *End quote*.

 If you were baptized as a young child, you did not know what it all meant to live a kingdom life. Your parents lovingly, based on their beliefs, promised you they would do certain things for you in an effort to teach you enough so you could one day decide for yourself if you were willing to continue with the promises your parents made for you on your baptism day.

 When you were confirmed, you voiced for yourself your intent to live a kingdom life and all that requires of you. Including, but not limited to living among God’s people, listening to God’s word and partaking in communion. You promised God you would proclaim the good news of what Jesus has done for us in forgiving our sins and giving us eternal life in what you do and what you say. You promised God you would serve **all** people just like Jesus did and you would do your best to bring justice and peace in the world.

 Living a kingdom life means giving your **all** to God. Your thoughts, words and deeds, your attitude, your gifts of time and talents, you are to give it all back to God because we are to give to God the things that are God’s. You are God’s. You were created in the image of God. At your baptism you were marked with the cross of Christ and that was forever. You are a child of God.

 You do not belong to the world. You do not belong to your favorite sport team. You do not belong to any other empire. You are God’s. It’s never easy because the other empires want you to be theirs. They want you to give of yourself to them. But life is never black and white. You can be a child of God and be a Packer fan. You can be a child of God and a politician. You can be a child of God and donate your time to other organizations other than church.

 Yet you are called to live all parts of your life from the perspective of being a child of God. If there is something you are doing in your life now or in the future that does not come out of your beliefs of God or are in the promises you make here today, remember who you belong to. Love others, even your enemies, strive to make this world as much like the kingdom of heaven as you can.

God promises to be with us in our times of confusion when the world we are in just doesn’t make any sense or when our world is out of control. God promises to love us in the middle of uncertainty as we try our best to follow in God’s ways, even if it is against the world’s ways.

 You are a child of God, loved and forgiven for your sins. Hold on to God’s promise to you this day and all the days of your life. Amen.