



October 18, 2026

"Give Unto Caesar, Give Unto God"

Pastor Liz Radtke

Okay. I have a classic challenge for you. I invite you—and I mean like for real, I invite you—to pat your head and rub your stomach at the same time. Can you do it? Okay, now switch hands. Okay, now switch to rubbing your head and patting your stomach. Okay, so it is entirely doable to do these things, and to do them at the same time. But it does require some concentration and effort, especially when I started messing with things.

Paul said that we should be imitators of Jesus. But sometimes I think about imitating Jesus and following Jesus's lead, I feel like we're being asked and expected to do more than two things at once. And the things, they are a lot harder than patting and rubbing. When I read the Gospels, it just blows my mind—the paradoxes that Jesus seems to hold in tension with such seeming ease, way beyond what we just tried.

He is stern with his enemies, and still loves them. He challenges longstanding authorities and customs, and still remains a model Jew among Jews. He constantly puts up with opposition and debate from leaders like the chief priests in the last few weeks' readings and the Pharisees in today's readings, and he keeps still pushing their boundaries and their buttons, trying to get them to see that he is truly the Messiah sent by God, and that they need to change. He puts up with his own followers who half the time don't get what he's talking about, and he keeps telling parables that are ambiguous, just open-ended enough that they might capture the maximum number of people's attention and imagination, and start some conversations.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem to the sound of ringing hosannas and accolades and praise, and he still follows through with God's plan to save the whole world, the whole creation, by emptying himself, being obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross, going from hero to criminal, from praise to humiliation, from celebration to pain. Jesus even prayed that the cup, that is the passion story that would take him to the cross, that that cup would pass from him, and he still finished the prayer by saying, "God, not my will, but yours." He knew that to walk God's way would be hard, harder than words could ever describe, and he still trusted God—that God would see him through right on through death itself to resurrection and new life.

And we, we are invited to that same tension, the same trust, the same faith, the same journey from death to new life, again and again, every day dying to sin and being raised to new life until we too enter the eternal.

Today's Gospel reading continues the confrontations that we have been seeing in the last few weeks: from the Palm Sunday entrance at the beginning of chapter 21 of Matthew, to flipping the tables in the

Temple and driving out the money changers, to the provocative parables that got the chief priests up in arms. Today, we are now partway into chapter 22. And then now, the Pharisees give it a go. They try to trap Jesus because the chief priests couldn't, and they try to do so with a Roman coin. It's a test of allegiance.

These hardheaded, hardhearted, too-attached-to-their-station-and-power leaders trusted the same God that Jesus was sent by, and yet, they didn't seem to be able to do two things at once: trust God and recognize Jesus; trust God and join in the shouts of "Hosanna!"; trust God and believe the signs of the Messiah's long-awaited arrival in the shape and manner of Jesus.

And so, these leaders challenge Jesus's authority. They refuse to let go. They react or fail to react out of fear of the crowds and fear of losing what they thought was more important. All of this is out of fear. They are often amazed, and astonished, and offended, and resort to plotting and conspiring, and eventually arresting Jesus and hanging him on a cross.

They couldn't do two things at once. They couldn't see that Jesus was healing and teaching and calling for repentance, all good things, and accept at the same time that he was simply different than what they were expecting, and that it meant that they would have to change their own lives. It's hard to follow the thing that's right in front of you if you have a blind spot that keeps you from seeing it.

Martin Luther wrote about this paradox, this unexpected quality of the Messiah. Luther talked about the difference between being a theologian of the cross and a theologian of glory. One book summed it up this way: a theologian of glory thinks that God shows up where humans expect God to show up, in things that are powerful, wise, and important by human standards. The Pharisees and the other leaders were expecting a king, a warrior. They knew the story that we heard this morning from Isaiah about Cyrus, the Persian king chosen by God to finally end the exile, to overthrow the Babylonians, subduing nations and stripping kings of their robes, breaking and cutting things into pieces. The Pharisees and the other leaders expected that the Messiah should be like that, striking fear into the Roman hearts—their century's Babylonian. They didn't think that the Messiah should be wasting his time tending to the outcasts, eating with the social dregs of society, and disrupting the routines of the Temple. They figured that Jesus must have either been crazy or some kind of rabble-rouser, not Messiah material.

So then to finish Luther's contrast, then the theologian of glory is that power that humans think of. A theologian of the cross knows that God is much more subtle. God shows up in those things that seem weak, foolish, and insignificant to human eyes. The point of the Isaiah reading isn't that God was choosing to work through a mighty king; the point of that Isaiah reading is that it is God who is working. God says to Cyrus, "For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name; I surname you, though you do not know me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no God. I arm you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one beside me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things."

God is the one who is working, and God will often work through the unexpected: the outsider like Cyrus, the weak like so many of God's people and heroes in the Bible, and the foolish, which is what the Pharisees thought Jesus was.

Paul says that we should be imitators of Jesus, but sometimes when I think about imitating Jesus and following Jesus's lead, I feel like we're being asked to do two extreme things at once. And the things are much harder than this: "Give to Caesar's what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's." To follow Jesus, I need to function in the world with all of its imperfections and imperfect leaders, imperfect governments, with all of its pain and injustice, with its taxing qualities. I can't withdraw. At the same time, to follow Jesus, I am also charged to go beyond Caesar's stuff, to love the Lord my God with all my heart, my soul, my mind, strength, and being. I am commanded to love as Jesus loves, and love my neighbor as myself, for

God. I'm called to look for God in the weak so that God's power is unquestionable. I am called to hold the Caesars and the chief priests of the world accountable, including myself, because their power does affect so many. I am called and charged to do all of this at the same time.

I look at the world and I see earthquakes and floods. I see horrific and senseless wars. I see people going hungry in the richest country in the world. I see kids both scared and apathetic to go to school because it is no longer a safe place just for learning. To follow Jesus, I have to trust that God is powerful and in control: "I am the Lord, there is no other." But then, I am also called to grapple with how God can allow all of this to happen. It comes down to human sin, sure, but why isn't God intervening?

But then, at the same time, I look for God, not in the destruction, but in the rebuilding; not in the devastation, but in the reconciliation; not in the inability to change our ways and think past our conveniences or profit, but in the work to heal the ecology and the climate and care for future generations. Following Jesus means I also pray, "Let this cup pass from me, but your will, not my will." And there are a lot of cups.

To follow Jesus, I am challenged, like the chief priests and Pharisees, to let go of my preconceptions, my comfort, my power. Just like them, I do want to entrap Jesus by putting him in a box that I created, that I can easily manage—picking and choosing the parts of Jesus's teaching, his way that I like, that work for me. But there is a new way to live being offered to me. It's available to me. I have to love the Lord my God completely—heart, mind, soul, strength, and being—and love my neighbors as myself; well, actually, more than myself. And to do this at the same time: head, and gut, and everything in between.

Jesus is right there for me to follow, but I've got a blind spot, too, that keeps me from seeing the path. I don't want to let go; I don't want to let Jesus out, I'm afraid to. It is really hard.

But even though it is hard living as a Christian, a theologian of the cross, God has our backs. The Holy Spirit equips us with gifts, works through our various vocations in life, and guides our love and service. God does demand much from us, but at the same time, God doesn't expect perfection. God knows us human beings, collectively and individually, too well for that. God is merciful and gracious, keeps turning us back from being turned in on ourselves, chips away at our blind spots, turns us forward, loving God and loving neighbor, and helps us to imitate Jesus.

Being a Christian is hard. Following the example and the lead of Jesus is hard. Loving like Jesus loves is hard, to the point of being paradoxical, in which we are asked to give God what is God's, which is everything. And at the same time, we give to God and our neighbors only what we have received from God: surprising, astonishing, undeserved, and even shocking amounts of love.

Amen.