

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today we find Jesus smack-dab in the center of political factions. In the context of politics, we know a faction to be a small-organized dissenting group within a larger one. However, factions can be identified in a much broader sense. Today, in this incredible democratic experiment that governs us, factions can easily be identified and understood in two dissenting political parties...Democrats and Republicans. Can we even begin to imagine politics any other way?

But in 1787, when delegates to the Constitutional Convention gathered in Philadelphia to hash out the foundations of this new government, they entirely omitted political parties from the new nation's founding document. Alexander Hamilton once called political parties "the most fatal disease" of popular governments. James Madison, who worked with Hamilton to defend the new Constitution to the public in the Federalist Papers, wrote in *Federalist 10* on November 23, 1787 that one of the functions of a "well-constructed Union" should be "its tendency to break and control the violence of faction."<sup>1</sup> I wonder how the politics of our founding fathers would fair out today?

By the same token, the idea of factions may not necessarily be established to cause dissenting violence or destroy, rather they can be used to debate an issue from opposing sides in order to come to a broader consensus and a more sincere understanding and trust.

Oddly enough and unintentionally, the good and the bad of factions are played out within our Gospel lesson today between the Pharisees, the Herodians, and Jesus. The Pharisees represent the pious sacred faction and the Herodians are an opposing pagan temporal faction...both with one common denominator...they both dislike Jesus who directs us all to a broader consensus and a more sincere understanding and trust in God. The scheme of the Pharisees and the Herodians is to overcome their fundamental differences in order to challenge Jesus in the hope he will answer their questions improperly and either lose favor with the public, or get in trouble with the Roman authorities.

One perception or one misunderstanding about this particular lesson that I find disturbing is that we read or hear it as Jesus besting the Herodians and the Pharisees...or even persuading them. In turn, we then feel compelled to do the same with our faith, when we are challenged by another faction who do not see things the way we do. If Jesus teaches us anything at all today, it ought to be that our faith is NOT a weapon to best others or to destroy others. Jesus does not destroy the Pharisees or the Herodians; he simply points them *and us* to a broader consensus about God. However, in their amazement they left Jesus and went away from him...Jesus does not punish them, he does not even persuade them, nor does he destroy them...there is nothing more said about them...they walk away.

The test the Herodians and the Pharisees attempt to entrap Jesus in is a simple question, do you follow the laws of the emperor or not. This is like a "heads-I-win, tails-you-lose" scenario...no matter how the coin lands, the one calling the shots wins. Likewise, no matter how Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/fed10.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp)

answers the Herodians and the Pharisees, in their eyes and in the eyes of society of that time, they think they will have entrapped Jesus and he will lose favor with his followers, the public, and or be in trouble with the Roman authorities...so they think.

I can say, or so we think also when our faith becomes a weapon. We can at times attempt to entrap Jesus within our own schemes and agendas in order to do battle with social issues of our choosing. As we read or listen to this text through our perspectives today, we can see how it humorously attempts to trap Jesus, and we can see how foolish these Herodians and the Pharisees look attempting to entrap Jesus. However, the story itself ends up entrapping us because we are just like the Pharisees and the Herodians when we use our faith to push our agendas.

What I mean by this is...we assume a self-righteousness when we feel we are defending God by taking on our “pet-issues” or even social justice issues. In other words, we confuse the righteousness we try to attain in society with our spiritual righteousness before God and the righteousness we attain in Jesus Christ.

It seems that the political climate of many churches and Christians in general, have taken on the politics of social justice that have bubbled up from within our culture today. This may be a very noble civil response but does it make us more “spiritually-righteous” before God?

This however, is not new. I believe that the lines of culture and faith were blurred post World War I & II, in that, the lines of patriotism and piety were blurred. This is to say that it was very patriotic to go to church on a Sunday morning and vice versa. Likewise today, it is very pious, or extremely righteous to stand up for the various social justice issues that divide our society today. Our self-righteousness only deepens the divide or strengthens the divisiveness of factions because we assume we are on God’s side...and they are not! But once again, we may be responding in a proper civil fashion, but does that make us more spiritually righteous, or even righteous before God?

When discerning this civil righteousness and this sacred righteousness I know *The Book of Concord* or our Lutheran Confessions contains the authoritative standards that can parse these factions out. In Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession titled, Concerning Public Order and Secular Government we are reminded that:

...it is taught that all political authority, orderly government, laws, and good order in the world are created and instituted by God <sup>[2]</sup> and that Christians may without sin exercise political authority; be princes and judges; pass sentences and administer justice according to imperial and other existing laws; punish evildoers with the sword; wage just wars; serve as soldiers; buy and sell; take required oaths; possess property; be married; etc.

<sup>[4]</sup> ...condemned are those who teach that Christian perfection means physically leaving house and home, spouse and child, and refraining from the above-mentioned activities. In fact, the only true perfection is true fear of God and true faith in God. For the gospel teaches an internal, eternal reality and righteousness of the heart, not an external, temporal one. <sup>[5]</sup> The gospel does not overthrow secular government, public order, and marriage but instead intends that a person keep all this as a true order of God and demonstrate in these walks of life Christian love and true good works according to each

person's calling. <sup>[6]</sup> Christians, therefore, are obliged to be subject to political authority and to obey its commands and laws in all that may be done without sin. <sup>[7]</sup> But if a command of the political authority cannot be followed without sin, one must obey God rather than any human beings.<sup>2</sup>

We can also look to Peter in the Book of Acts when he stood before the governing high priest who was ordering him NOT to preach or teach in the name of Jesus Christ, Peter and the apostles with him responded,

‘We must obey God rather than any human authority. (Acts 5:29b)

Is today's Gospel simply teaching us ways to deal with factions as we Christians become a more powerful faction ourselves? So where is the Good News in this divisive-temporal-world that is defined and identified by its many and various factions?

Today in our Gospel Jesus directs us to this division between the temporal and the divine when he said to the Pharisees and the Herodians:

"Whose head is this, and whose title?" <sup>21</sup> They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

By the coin's markings, Jesus is telling us that the coin belongs therefore to the emperor and to give God then the things that belong to God. Ownership in this case as presented by Jesus is indicated by the markings on the coin. Likewise, through the waters of our Baptism we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ. In this and through this Baptism we are also marked with the righteousness of Jesus Christ...ownership is established by these markings making us God's own. Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's. So as Baptized Children of God what then do we give to God?

There is a Christmas carol that I became familiar with a few years ago and it addresses this question beautifully. The carol is titled "In the Bleak Midwinter." This Christmas carol is based on a poem by the English poet Christina Rossetti. I first learned of this carol in the very beautiful arrangement by James Taylor whose arrangement is based on Gustav Holst's musical composition of the poem. What do we give to God...the last verse says this:

What can I give Him,  
Poor as I am? -  
If I were a Shepherd  
I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a Wise Man  
I would do my part, —  
Yet what can I give Him, —  
(I will) Give my heart.

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<sup>2</sup> Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P.. *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000. *The Augsburg Confession*, pages 48–50.

Today Jesus does not defeat the temporal empire or the folks in it, rather he stands in the middle of the dissenting parties and becomes the main focus despite their differences. Standing smack-dab in the middle of dissenting factions, Jesus is showing us how God's love breaks the control of a faction by telling us that the coin with all the markings belongs to emperor. The markings on the coin identify the emperor to us and we give back to the emperor what belongs to him.

In this we are taught that...when the factions of this world confront us, we give to God the very thing that identifies God among us, and makes God known to us...and that is His love...and we return that love to God when we share it with one another. Likewise, when doing this, may we remember that we are marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit, this makes us God's own. In the markings of Baptism upon us we have the promise of eternal life, both temporal and spiritual, rather we have the promise of eternal life, both in soul and body.

In this act of Baptism, the "factions" of water and the word have been united in Jesus Christ and poured over and untied with the soul and body of those receiving it. This is the well-constructed union breaks the control and violence of the factions of sin and death for us and returns us all to our rightful owner.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*