

Sermon: Return to Sender
Scripture: Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22
October 22, 2023
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Today's Old Testament reading is Exodus 33:12-23. It is the culmination of a series of new revelations of God's identity and names throughout the book of Exodus. It also shows the capacity of human prayer and advocacy for others to move God. Hear now God's Holy Word.

Exodus 33:12-23

¹² Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' ¹³ Now if I have found favor in your sight, please show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider, too, that this nation is your people." ¹⁴ The Lord said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." ¹⁵ And he said to the Lord, "If your presence will not go, do not bring us up from here. ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

¹⁷ The LORD said to Moses, "I will also do this thing that you have asked, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." ¹⁸ Moses said, "Please show me your glory." ¹⁹ And the Lord said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD,' and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰ But," the Lord said, "you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live." ²¹ And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, ²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³ then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen." Amen.

Today's New Testament reading comes from Matthew 22:15-22. After the chief priests and elders of the people questioned Jesus's authority, Christ answered them in three parts through three parables: the parable of the two sons, the parable of the wicked tenants, and the parable of the wedding banquet. Today's reading follows immediately after such explanation, where others take their turn to trap Jesus in his words. Listen now to the Word of the Lord for us this morning.

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. ¹⁶ So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, "Whose head is this and whose title?" ²¹ They answered, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." ²² When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Sermon: Return to Sender

The text: Text: "Now if I have found favor in your sight, please show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider, too, that this is nation is your people." Exodus 12:13

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, as we come to this sacred place to worship and honor you, would you let your Spirit reign in this place – that your Spirit would connect the hearts of every individual to one another and to you, that we would send back all the glory and praise at this time. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

I am sure that some of you might be thinking exactly how Dr. Kieffer reacted when I told her the title of the sermon. She recalled Elvis Presley's popular song "Return to Sender," and she started to sing. He sings about a returned letter that man receives as a rejection and returning person's intentions. Similarly in today's Matthew passage, we find a story of Pharisees and Herodians attempting to trap Jesus with a question about paying taxes, yet Christ returns their intentions back with the famous saying, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God, what is God's." Although it is not a perfect fit, the phrase reminds us of sending something back to its rightful owner. Today, we will focus on returning something even more valuable - our hearts, our prayers, and our devotion to the One who created us.

I wish sometimes things are very black and white: to separate the worldly matters, represented by the coin in today's Biblical story, and the spiritual matters, which belong to God. For example, Exodus passage reveals a profound moment in the life of Moses, a man chosen by God to lead the Israelites out of bondage. In this story, Moses has an intimate conversation with God, and he beseeches the Lord, saying, "if your presence will not go with us, do not bring us up from here." Moses understands that without God's guidance, their journey is in vain. Their worldly matters, worldly lives are interconnected and interwoven by their spiritual matters.

Just as Moses prayed for God's presence to accompany them on their journey, we too, must remember the importance of inviting God into every aspect of our lives, especially during times of conflict and uncertainty. In the current climate of division and discord, we may be tempted to look for worldly solutions, but Moses' plea reminds us that without God's presence, our efforts are fruitless. While we must meet our earthly duties and responsibilities to our best abilities, we must never forget that our true citizenship is in the Kingdom of God.

This week, I was in Louisville, conversing about many great things that the PCUSA and its churches are doing ecumenically and interreligiously, forging and mending many broken relationships. We are continuing to do the good work of connecting with our siblings across the world. During the midst of these important conversations, once again, the headlines blew up about the hospital being attacked in Gaza, which shook our hearts during the meeting. As we were reading the newspapers and headlines and media, many responses that we have seen show that there were many quick to pick a side, to be either pro-Israeli or pro-Palestine, and we read many statements and their biased responses. We had Zoomed with PCUSA's regional liaison based in Bethlehem to hear from our own boots on the ground and got an update the hospital that was bombed was in a relationship with one of our own churches for more than 20 years! Through the staff, we also learned that PCUSA had off and on relationship too, as the only Christian hospital serving the Palestinians in Gaza. It shook us. It made us angry, brought our emotions to the table, making us wonder what we should do next. As our reactive emotions settled down, we discerned that even in the midst of chaos and pain, God's kingdom and kin-dom reigns supreme. When the world beckons us to choose sides, we must remember that our ultimate allegiance is to our Creator. As members of the Body of Christ, we are called to be peacemakers, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to seek and continue to seek reconciliation with one another. We are called to return to God the conflicts and divisions that plague our world, as well as in our own lives, trusting in God's divine wisdom and guidance.

Returning to sender is not just about prayers for peace in far-off lands; it's also about redirecting our hearts and minds with our strength and our prayers, to God in our daily lives that they belong to the Lord. It's about giving back to God what is God's, which is everything. It's about returning

to the One who formed us, who knows our struggles, who knows each and every one of us by our names, that God knows our deepest fears and our most precious hopes in our hearts.

In our individual lives, we are facing conflicts and challenges of our own. We are battling our personal struggles, family disputes, and often our inner turmoil. In these moments, remember that God is the Sender, and God is waiting for us to return to God, just as the prodigal son returned to his father's embrace.

I'm reminded of a story of St. Francis which was once told to me. St. Francis went day after day into a cave to pray. When he came out each day, one of his brothers would ask him, *Did God say anything?* Francis said *No*. Yet, Francis went back into the cave each day. Day by day he poured out his soul, he poured out his heart, and day by day God answered *No*. Finally, one day this brother, who continues to be the accountability partner to Francis asked the same question, *Did God say anything to you today?* and Francis surprised him: *Yes, God did say one word to me. So the brother asked – So what was that word?* Francis answered *More*.

We serve a jealous God, who wants more of each and every one of us. We serve the God who wants to build the intimate relationship, that the bridge is almost made over to our side and simply God says, *lay down that last brick*. God simply wants *more* of us.

Let us render to God what is God's. If you asked me what belongs to God? I will say Jesus. You. Me. The people next to you. Even the agnostic neighbor who lives down the street. Everything we marvel and see through very our eyes, and the things even our eyes cannot see belongs to the Lord. Even the Pharisees, Herodians who were entrapping Christ in today's story, the Israelites who were complaining to Moses in front of God who is leading them every day, and even the realm of Caesar that people are talking about... They all belong to the Lord.

It doesn't matter if the challenge is as complex as Israeli-Palestine relationship and its ongoing personal battle unsure of what the right steps may be. It does not matter if it is great or small in terms of complexity. It can be simple as an anxiety that prevents us from sleeping, worries of how our portfolio might be tomorrow, how to spend our time, our energy, and even our brokenness. They are all God's. Therefore friends, let us Return them to Sender in prayer and in continual praise as we remember the Lord's presence that is covering us, going ahead of us, watching over us, and most importantly who has a temple and a house in each of our hearts as we go forth every day. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.