

Give to God What is God's

Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

Isaiah 45:1-7; Matthew 22:15-22
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
October 18, 2020 – Stewardship II

We are in this *together*. And we're going to get through this, together.

It is interesting to ponder what all we mean by "this." We certainly mean the coronavirus pandemic, with its various struggles. We're going to get through that together. But we may also imagine that we mean this time of intense polarization in our society; our struggles with racial injustice, economic challenge, ecological disruption, and hostility and violence between opposing groups and parties. We may, in fact, imagine that we mean the entire sweep of the drama of salvation. God is bringing about God's beloved community, and the beloved community has a place for all of us. We are in this together.

All of that is held together by the sovereignty of God. "The sovereignty of God, the sovereignty of God, the sovereignty of God," a seminary professor of mine would say, poking a little bit of affectionate fun at how we Presbyterians see the sovereignty of God everywhere, holding everything together. One of our central convictions is that God is sovereign over everything. God created all that is, God is Lord of all that is, every knee in heaven and earth will bow before God, God alone is sovereign. God is concerned not just about our spiritual lives, but also about our political and economic and social lives. This is why we remember that our 16th century father, John Calvin, was concerned about details like *trash collection* in the city of Geneva, Switzerland, because God is concerned about the health of people who live in cities, which is affected by things like city sanitation. God is sovereign over it all. Our two texts today, that Leslie just read for us, are among the places where we learn that.

"I am the Lord, and there is no other. There is no one besides me," God thunders in Isaiah 45. Isaiah is speaking these words to the Israelites who were suffering in exile, displaced from their homeland and deported to Babylon. What the Israelites wanted, more than anything, was to go back home. God is announcing here that a great homecoming is about to happen. Their dreams, their deepest hopes, are about to be fulfilled, because of the work of the sovereign God.

The twist in the story, however, is how God will make that happen. Verse 1 tells us that Israel's homecoming will happen through the historical agency of the pagan emperor Cyrus, of the Persian Empire. "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to open doors before him." You may know that the word 'anointed' in verse 1 is the Hebrew word for 'messiah,' so that the non-Israelite

king Cyrus is a messiah for Israel. A messiah is an agent who brings about God's purposes. When the church claims that Jesus is *the* Messiah, we are claiming that Jesus is the Agent who brings God's kingdom near. In Isaiah 45, the prophet is announcing—in a way that could have scandalized listeners — that the sovereign God of Israel is willing to use the most unexpected characters to accomplish God's purposes. Now, this would all have been news to the mighty Persian emperor, who surely thought that he was pursuing his own agenda and the imperial interests of Persia, and may not have taken kindly to the news that he was simply a pawn in the hands of the God of Israel.

The sovereignty of God is always a check on the powers that be. It puts them on notice that God can use them, but for God's purposes, not for their own agendas or glory, and that God can put them aside when God is finished with them. Glory, honor, power, praise, and allegiance belong to God and to God alone. Ever since the Shema from Deuteronomy 6 was first uttered — "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone"; ever since the first commandment — "you shall have no other gods before me" — human allegiance has belonged to God alone. That is what we mean by the sovereignty of God.

But we humans are typically slow to grasp this, and our hearts can so easily want to have it both ways. Jesus may have said in Matthew 6, "You cannot serve God and wealth," but we would really like to give it a try. God wants us to love the Lord with *all* our heart, but we'd like to give a little bit of our hearts to pursuing creature comforts; and popularity; and being seen as a winner. Like Adam and Eve, we *want* to continue our intimate relationships with God in the garden, but couldn't we get just a few of the benefits of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? We want racial justice... but we may not want to give up all of the advantages of being white. We want there to be civil discourse... but we'd like the other side to acknowledge that we've been right all along. We want to cause less damage to the environment... but we don't really want to change the way we live. We want to lose weight and be healthier, but we don't want to give up our ice cream and French fries. We can want to have it both ways. You could probably come up with your own list of these, and it might be different from mine.

What we may see is that the sovereignty of God means that everything belongs to God. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." God is working God's purposes out, using outsiders like Cyrus, using the poor, using our enemies, using all sorts of what Walter Brueggemann calls "conventionally unacceptable people,"¹ — God is capable of using it all, in some mysterious, inscrutable way to accomplish God's good and gracious will. After all, the church believes that God used the execution and crucifixion of the Messiah — the worst thing imaginable — to accomplish the salvation of the world. God alone is good, and God alone is sovereign.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 76.

So when Jesus tells the hypocritical Pharisees and Herodians in Matthew 22 to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to give to God what is God's, he is inviting us into a lifelong journey of discovering just how much of our lives we are ready to give to God. He is challenging us to examine all of our other loyalties and pursuits, to see whether we are pursuing them for God's sake, or whether we are pursuing them for some other reason. I know I've got all kinds of loyalties and allegiances that can carry me in directions other than towards my Lord and Savior and his will for my life. I have a lot of work to do. The life of faith is a daily practice of noticing those divergent allegiances, those pursuits, those addictions, and then sitting with them before the Lord, seeing if we might be ready, with God's help, to let go of them for a little while, and live differently.

The practice of stewardship is an invitation to a life of increasing generosity towards the world and towards God. It is an invitation to respond to God's sovereign generosity towards us, to let God's generosity flow in us, and to flow out of us towards the world.

This year's Stewardship Campaign is titled "Together," because we are walking together towards God's beloved community, and we want you to be part of that journey. The Stewardship Committee's goal for this year is to increase the number of 'pledging units' this year by 5%, to expand the number of people who are investing in the mission and ministry of this congregation. If you have not made a pledge to the church before, we would love for you to do that this year. And because these are challenging times for so many, if you are able to maintain your giving level from last year – or even increase it – that would be so helpful. If we do this, we believe that will make it possible for us to provide \$1.2 million for our ministry and mission in the world in the next year.

During 2020, in the middle of a pandemic, thanks to the ongoing generosity of the congregation, and the thoughtful stewardship of church funds, we are blessed to be operating with a meaningful budget surplus during this time. This is going to make it possible for us to use a portion of that to address needs at Lewinsville, as well as being able to provide additional financial support to mission partner organizations that are meeting the needs of vulnerable people during this time, *and* to support ministries in our presbytery that are meeting needs at this time. We believe God is calling us to continue doing these things, and we need your support to do that.

The easiest way to make your pledge is to click the "Make a Pledge Online" button on our homepage at Lewinsville.org. You can also return the pledge card that was mailed to you recently.

Friends, in the midst of all that is going on right now, God is at work, building the beloved community, working God's purposes out, and inviting us to respond and participate with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love; to give to God what belongs

to God – beginning with our hearts and flowing out from there. To God *alone* be all the glory. Amen.