

**Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas**

GOSPEL

Matthew 22:15-22

The holy gospel according to Saint Matthew, the twenty-second chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said. ¹⁶So 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. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” ²¹They 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.” ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

We are standing at the threshold of the moment when we will remember that 500 years ago, a monk who had his heart opened to the wild and wonderful grace of God was bold enough to stand and ask his church why we weren’t living in the fullness of the truth of our story. Brother Martin, imperfect though he was, marked a new era in the life of the church with his brave call to deeper faithfulness in his life, and we continue to be the church reforming now, centuries later.

He saw the church failing in a way humanity has failed for so long, in trying to claim to own what only belongs to God, which Jesus shows us in Matthew today.

I am lucky enough to have been able to visit some of the places where Brother Luther lived, taught, and prayed. And the memories of those places are very strong this year. Visiting the sites of the Reformation, being on a pilgrimage, showed me how some places are holy because they bear certain moments in history into the present, and we connect through them to the depth of our story. Space becomes a sacred vessel, a sort of time machine.

Of course, some spaces are sacred not because they connect us to a moment in time from before we ever lived, but because they hold within their walls sacred memories of our own

journeys. The passage of our times is etched into them. The living room of our childhood home, the church where we were confirmed, married, or where we brought our children to the waters of baptism, where we have commended those we love to God. The place where we met someone we love, or where we feel most safe, most ourselves.

Space and time dance like that, in different ways. Perhaps we notice it especially now, at this particular moment along the road of Reformation.

And, as most of you know, we are standing also today at the threshold of a new chapter in the life of God's people called Peace Lutheran Church. We will leave this room today, and when we see it again, it will be changed. We will probably still recognize it, but it will also be new. New floors, ceiling, lights and sounds, the same and yet new.

The community of Peace is, though, a people who knows what it is to be the church in more than one place in more than one way. This is at least the fourth? Is it the fourth place where we have worshipped. And, even this building and room have changed over years. For some of us, it has always been pretty much this way, but others remember the grey-carpeted platform (whose remnants are not quite yet gone) this wall as the front. Maybe you remember what it looked like here before the sheetrock went up or the ceiling went in, or even what it looked like at the very first, when the trampoline pit was here.

Of course, no one place is ever cast in amber and unchanged, even the places we think of that way. We visit our hometowns, our schools, our childhood homes, and we realize their permanence in our memories, isn't the same as how they change with the passage of time.

Even the Castle Church in Wittenberg has changed. The great metal doors that stand where Luther may or may not have nailed his 95 Theses up for all to see have been placed there since (of course, because he couldn't have nailed anything into them if they were the ones that had been there then). Also, a Holocaust memorial has been placed at the corner of the City Church, where a particularly violent anti-Semitic piece of art remains. And instead of removing it, the people there chose to remember it with repentance, and place near it a monument to remind them of how wrong we have continued to be as the church, at times, even since that grand day almost 500 years ago.

Another thing about sacred memory and sacred space is how it also lives like rings on a tree, one enfolding the last over the passage of time, space also lives in layers. (I am reminded of the 4th century baptistery that is now underground beneath the piazza in front of the grand cathedral of Milan. If you descend down stone steps, under the centuries of history already standing above the ground, you find even more of the story under the earth, the place where St. Ambrose baptized St. Augustine.) Our story sometimes holds us up from underneath our own feet, unseen.

There is another thing about visiting sacred places...places that bring us closest to the holy. We tend to want to leave a mark of our presence there, to know that the place is changed, if only

ever so slightly because we were there. You see this in the crosses carved by Crusaders into the walls of holy sites in the Middle East.

The first time I think I saw it was at the top of the Eiffel Tower. At first I was stunned that people were bold enough to deface a place so famously beautiful. But before I left, I found myself writing my own name, ever so small, probably now covered over many times. It mattered that I had been there. I actually found the picture just this past week while going through boxes in the garage. A real printed picture, taken on actual film. A photo of a mark I left to show that I had come close to something amazing. I changed it a little bit, because it changed me.

This place has changed many of us, and now it is about to change, again. We will come back here to something that is both old and new again, which is perhaps what the Reformation has always been about, perhaps it's what the journey of God and God's people has always been about.

But before we go, if you want to, I am going to offer an unusual invitation today. Today, is a unique moment. And you are invited, if you wish, to change this place, just a little bit, to honor how it has changed you.

I left my name on the Eiffel Tower, and it's covered over by so many other names and messages now. Pilgrims to the Holy Land have carved crosses in walls, left scrolls of prayers in cracks in ancient masonry. And the story has grown, layer upon layer. When you come back to walk on this floor, it will be completely new, but what is old will still be there, too, a layer underneath, still holding us up, with the weight of all the footsteps that it has carried over the years. So, if you want to, leave a mark, an image, a memory, a message on this floor today. (The markers are permanent, so be mindful as you share them around, and do please only mark the floor. We aren't planning, nor have we budgeted to, say, repaint all the walls.)

Kristen is going to play some music for us, for a few minutes. If you want to offer some prayers of thanks for what this place has been, as well as hold in your heart some hopes for its future, we will hold some time to do that now. We stand at the threshold of 500th year of the Reformation of God's church. And we are reminded in very real ways, how our God is still at work changing the world, making us new, and meeting us in the holy places of our lives.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray,

With thanks to God for the ministries of this place,
we ask God's presence for the changes that are coming.
We pray for safety for all workers, for patience and wisdom,

and for the renewal of this space for the sake of all those gathered here by God.
In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
may the witness of all who minister here in the name of Jesus Christ
continue to live on beyond these walls in the weeks to come,
and may we be called back to this space again,
filled with God's Spirit and purpose.

Amen.