**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH , UCC 10/22/17**

***The Immortals***

**A Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**THE NOW TESTAMENT**

The Now Testament for this morning is not a modern poem or prose piece. The Now Testament for this morning is in the New Testament. It is from the anonymous Letter to the Hebrews 12:1-2. The writer is trying to convince Hebrew Christians to continue to follow in the way and teachings of Jesus Christ, rather than returning to their old faith based on Moses and the Law.

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Matthew 22:15-22

Unlike recent Sundays, today’s Gospel is not a parable, but a story about a plot by the Pharisees to entrap Jesus by tricking him into committing treason against the Roman emperor, thereby eliminating Jesus as a threat to the religious status quo.

**SERMON**

This Q & A between the Pharisees and Jesus occurs in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, as well as today’s Gospel of Matthew. The story is almost identical in each of the three Gospels, which testifies, I think, to the story’s centrality to our faith.

The heart of the interchange is Jesus’ response to the entrapping question the Pharisees had devised for him: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?”

If Jesus answers, "No," to paying taxes, the authorities will lock him up. But Jesus gives an answer that the Pharisees and their disciples will not soon forget, especially as Jesus’ words are translated in the King James and Revised Standard Version of the Bible: “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God, the things that are God’s.”

In the NRSV that we heard this morning it reads, *“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s. When the Pharisees heard this, they were amazed, and they left Jesus and went away.”*

(Matthew 22:21-22)

And what is so amazing about these words of Jesus?

Even the Pharisees believe that God is creator and ruler of all, and so as Jesus is declaring that we are to pay our taxes to the government and give God what is God’s, Jesus is also declaring that the government belongs to God, that even the emperor, even the United States President, belong to God, and we are to give them to God, along with our taxes.

Like Caesar and the President, we belong to God too, and we are to give to God what the signers of the American Declaration of Independence pledged to each other: “Our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

That each of us belongs to God is well-illustrated on our worship bulletin cover for this morning, with its painting called “Self,” of a woman gazing into the bathroom mirror, not to evaluate her appearance, not to determine who she is, but rather, to understand whose she is, and which road to take when “Two roads diverge in a yellow wood.” *(adapted by JB from Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken”)*

And so I suggest that the next time we look into the mirror we look to understand whose we are and where we are going, especially when roads diverge.

And as I contemplate whose I am and where I am going, I find myself reflecting on where I have been, where I have been these past sixteen years, since walking through the West Center Church doors in January 2001, and into this beautiful building with its magnificent sanctuary.

But as I learned with my hands and fingers in Sunday school long ago, the church is not the building. “Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people!”

And as I think back on my sixteen West Center years, I think of the people who have gathered and continue to gather here to worship and serve, to be blessed and to bless.

Over the years some West Center Church members and friends have moved out of the area to new locations, while others have gone ahead to be with God. Still others were here in 2001 when I arrived. They are here today and will be here for many tomorrows.

At West Center Church, with our members and friends who have moved away, who have passed away or are here today and will be here tomorrow, we are surrounded, as is written in Hebrews 12:1-2,

*“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that it set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”*

The names of many of those who have gone on, as well as the names of many who are still among us are recorded in “The Church Register of The West Center Church, Volumes I and II. The first volume is from 1927-1949, and the second volume is from 1950 to the present moment. In these registers are recorded the names of church members, marriages, births, baptisms, confirmations and deaths. I have kept the our register up to date.

It’s a fascinating record.

In my sixteen years here, I have officiated at eight weddings, including the wedding of long-time member Tracy Mertens and James Carr; Heather Claxton and Frank Scopel; Carol McLoughlin and Diane Brinkman (who will be with us next Sunday); Indiya Okam and UK Ikweehegh; and Colette Lopane, the granddaughter of long-time member Betty Haller, and Stephen Capella. Their wedding bells continue to animate the joyous spirit within and beyond the walls of our West Center Church.

Since 2001 Pastor Emeritus Allan Ross or I have baptized 28 infants, children and adults, including Samuel and Teresa France; Ellie Parson and Margaret Puccio, Paula Parson’s granddaughters, and Paula’s grandson, Nicholas. We baptized three adults: SLC student Jacob Ritari, Robert Walton and Charles Mitchell. We also baptized Charles and Bambi Mitchell’s daughter, Lauren, and the four children of Amanda and Jesse Wilson: Ernest, Benjamin, Jesse Jr, and Dameon. We baptized all three of the Arroyo-Valentin daughters: Leeanna, Emma and Karina, and Indiya Okam and UK’s son and daughter, Manny and Daisy- Grace. That’s a lot of baptismal joy and hope for the future in this great cloud of witnesses!

Confirmation: During my years we have had four enthusiastic young people join the church as confirmands: Taylor Furey, Madison Furey, Lauren Mitchell and Benjamin Rice.

And now I have a question for the congregation: Do you think we had more people join West Center Church or pass away in the past sixteen years?

We had more people join West Center than pass away. Some of the people who joined moved away, but wherever they may be, they are part of our West Center Church cloud of witnesses.

Thirty-seven people joined in these 16 years, including Scott Johnson, Arlene Holtum, Paul Collarile, Joy DeBellis, Georgia LaBlanc, Bambi and Charles Mitchell, Peggy Looney, Ana Valentin, Javier Aroyo, Indiya Okam and UK, Teresa and Peter Rosado, Sheila Sievertsen, and Hayley Chow Moreno.

And those who have gone on to be with God who were members and friends at the time of their passing number thirty, plus three others who had moved away but remained part of our fellowship with their continued interest and support of West Center Church through the years.

Hear their names, and if you were at West Center Church when they were here, you’ll remember their faces and their contributions to our church:

Bob Mertens

Bertha Bowles

Peter Dierks (Jo-Ann’s husband)

Ann-Luise Bartling

Allen and Belle Redman

Molly Babcock

Paul Deege

Michael and Gladys Falcone

George and Avis Reisinger

Lloyd and Doris Roberson

George Shively

Eric Nelson (Jo-Ann’s brother)

Mary Macerata

Cynthia Kawasaki

Lilly Nickerson (June’s mother)

Joan Wynn

Ruth Scherm

Dudley Taw

Marge Edwards

Ruth Sicklick

Roger Johnson

Betty Haller

Ann DeRosa

Ethel Danielson

Connie Alverez

Charlotte Wong

and Janet D’Amato.

Their spirits are in our church DNA; their spirits are with us through eternity, inspiring us “to run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE** *Come Down, O Love Divine*

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