

“God Calls You!”  
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
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1 Thessalonians 1:1-11  
Matthew 22:15-22

We tend to remember the people with the big names in the bible: Jesus. Abraham. Moses. Mary. I wish I could assume that you know lots of other women in the bible, but unfortunately they don't take up enough space in biblical memory. We remember Paul. If you get lost beyond those names, please: don't feel bad. I still shudder with shame when I remember that in one of my early seminary classes, I completely got Noah and Moses mixed up. My dedicated Sunday School teachers had dutifully taught me these stories— repeatedly— when I was a child raised in church, but in a moment of daftness for a future pastor, I had Noah floating in a basket on the Nile, and Moses herding the animals onto an ark.

So I will forgive you if you don't remember the two people Paul mentions in his letter to the Thessalonians: Silvanus, and Timothy. These two had traveled with Paul in his missions, and had remained in Thessalonica to nurture the new church there. I had always read quickly over these two names, but it turns out, ***it's important to pay attention to who does stuff in the church and why.***

Silvanus— whose name was shortened to Silas in casual mention, as we see in Acts— was one of the early Jewish followers of Jesus, from back in Jerusalem. People could track his pathway of faith back to the first followers of Jesus. And, as a devout Jew, he could show to other Jews that what Jesus taught was a continuation and fulfillment of the teachings of Judaism. Scholars also believe that Silas was a Roman citizen. That meant he held some social and political power. I once served a church just outside of Washington, D.C., and we had a US Representative who worshiped with us with his family. Even though people *acted* like it was no big deal that a US Representative said The Lord's Prayer and confessed his sins each week right along with the rest of us, when this church member spoke up in matters of church leadership, people listened. He did not exploit it, but he was a man used to being listened to. I imagine Silas' relationship to the church as like that.

Timothy, whom Paul also addressed in his greeting to the Thessalonians, had quite a different background than Silvanus. Timothy's dad was a Greek, and polytheistic. His mother, Eunice, was a Jew who had become a follower of Jesus; his grandmother, Lois did as well. For those of you who grew up in a household with two cultures, you know what it is like to need to learn how to represent one culture to the other— or to feel caught between two cultures. Even though Timothy had not been circumcised as an infant as is Jewish custom, Paul decided that— in order for Timothy to be taken seriously by the Jews— that Timothy would have to get circumcised, even as an adult. Paul had come to even believe that circumcision was no longer necessary to follow in the ways of Jesus; however, Paul was so concerned that listeners who thought this

was important would dismiss Timothy, that he urged Timothy to go through with this rite. I hope none of you have had to take as drastic measures as this to be taken seriously in our church!

The letter also draws on the name of Jesus, calling him both **Lord**— a name that Roman culture reserves only for the Emperor— and the name **Christ**— a name that Jews reserve only for the awaited Messiah. So it is a bold claim Paul makes, one that put him at odds with both Jews and the Roman citizenry.

In fact, the people of Thessalonica disliked Paul so much that they canceled him: a mob formed, setting the city in an uproar, causing Paul to flee. The authorities charged Paul with turning the “whole civilized world upside down” (Acts 17:6); they weren’t only concerned with him teaching against their customs and their gods, but for “acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus” (17:7). So Paul and Silas went to a more receptive crowd in Berea, and then to another church in Corinth— but still, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica to check on believers there and encourage them. Timothy came back with good news: a glowing report of their work of faith and labor of love and their steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The audacity of such a claim— that Jesus could be the king— evokes the context where Jesus spoke to a crowd of both Pharisees and Herodians on the matter of paying taxes. Each group wanted to trap Jesus: the Pharisees wished for an overthrowing of Rome, and would have considered the face on the coin of the emperor to be a graven image; not only that, the inscription, “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Augustus” indicated the belief that the emperor was God himself. To the Pharisees, this would be idolatry. As for the Herodians, they were also Jews, but they benefited from Roman rule. If Jesus had taken a stand in that moment against the paying of taxes, they would have reported him to the Roman authorities.

I am reminded of how high the stakes are, and how easy it is to misspeak, when trying to offer words about the catastrophe unfolding in the Middle East. The lives of Wadea Al-Fayoume, a 6 year old Palestinian American child outside of Chicago, and Samantha Woll, president of her Detroit synagogue, bear witness to how much is at stake.

Jesus’ answer— render to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s, threw both groups off— because in truth, even the Pharisees carried these idolatrous coins in their cloaks. Even they could not be pure from the economy of Caesar’s rule. But Jesus’ implication is this: “Give the emperor his due — and by the same token, do the same for God! Give the emperor the things that bear his image — and tell me, what bears God’s image? Human beings, of course!”<sup>1</sup>

If each one of us bears the image of God, what does it mean to give God what God is due?

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<sup>1</sup> “COIN FLIP: SALT'S COMMENTARY FOR TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST” in saltproject.org Oct. 16, 2023

Well, as I mentioned earlier in this sermon when talking about Silas and Timothy, it is important to take note of who does stuff in the church and why.

Have you asked Vicky, a woman who has never had children of her own, volunteers to teach our youngest children in Sunday School, year after year? Do you know why Venge, who is super busy with his work at the UN and traveling the world, volunteers to be a Deacon? Have you thought about who put the paraments on the communion table and pulpit, and what it means to them to have a beautiful sanctuary? What about those whom we may not see in our sanctuary week to week because their mobility impairments keep them home, but are watching online, and are often the ones praying the hardest for us? Have you asked our teenagers who have been confirmed and still come back to worship and even teach our younger kids why those relationships matter? Do you know who is tending and investing in our building now, so that it will still be a space of worship and community not just next Sunday but also 10, 20, 30 years from now? Or who represents our church each week as they volunteer with Family Promise? Who counts the offering each week? *Hopefully, these people do not do these things because they are masochists.* I don't think they are suckers for punishment, though sometimes they do tedious work and don't get thanked for it. I think they do these things because on some level, they sense that God calls them to offer these gifts of time and energy and skill and connection—and when they do these things, they are expressing how the image of God shows up on their faces.

“For we know,” Paul writes, “brothers and sisters, siblings beloved by God, that God has chosen YOU. Paul did not say that God chose *him*—speaking of himself. He did not say that God has chosen Timothy, or Silas. Paul was speaking to each individual in the entire congregation; in fact, he specifically asked in his conclusion that his letter be read out loud to the church, knowing that some people in the congregation weren't literate. They needed to hear that they were called and chosen by God, just as much as the educated members.

You don't have to have the gravitas as a US Congressman to be chosen by God or to impact the church. The truth is, what you offer may be simple and it may be huge. It may be forgotten tomorrow or remembered through time. Your only job is to answer God's call— and to affirm it in someone else.