Sermon from
October 18, 2026
Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Amy Vigesaa

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Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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Astrid Lindgren is one of the most well-known Swedish authors in the world. She became an author relatively late in life, and an influential voice on everyday issues even later. Because of her popularity, people in Sweden listened to what Lindgren had to say. She is, of course, the author of the beloved children's fairytales about Pippi Longstocking.

Pippi Longstocking was first born on a sickbed. Astrid Lindgren's daughter Karin was ill and asked her mother to tell her about Pippi Långstrump, which is her Swedish name. Little did they know that a global superstar had just been born.
If you know Pippi, you know that she's a girl who defies all conventions. She lives by herself although she's only a child, and she is strong enough to lift a horse. It's easy to imagine the stir caused by this little girl in the 1940s – full of rebellion and with little respect for grown-ups and authorities. Astrid Lindgren had just as much grit and guts as her beloved character.

At the age of 68 she submitted an opinion piece to the Swedish daily on the subject of a loophole in the Swedish tax system, which meant that

she, as a self-employed writer, had to pay 102 per cent tax on her income. Lindgren wrote the piece in the style of a fairytale, and ‘Pomperipossa in Monismania’ -- became front-page news and actually led to a change in the tax law. It was published in 1976 and created a major debate about the Swedish tax system. The marginal tax rate above 100%, dubbed the "Pomperipossa effect", was due to tax legislation that required self-employed individuals to pay both regular income tax and employer's fees.
The story, a satirical allegory about a writer of children's books in a distant country, led to a stormy tax debate and is often attributed as a decisive factor in the defeat of the Swedish Social Democratic Party, for the first time in 40 years. (from https://sweden.se)

When my daughter got her first paycheck in her grown-up job, she was shocked. Taxes taken out were much more than she expected and it was upsetting. She assumed there had been a mistake, but upon checking, there wasn’t- this was simply the reality. No one seems to like taxes. We certainly want to hold onto as much money as we can from our paychecks and still not have to pay the government during tax season. During election season, it is always a topic of discussion with blanket statements made as to which candidate will raise taxes and which one will lower them. Promises are made. When we think rationally about it though, we know there is some good in the taxes we pay. They help pay for things like roads and infrastructure, airports and hospitals, programs and services that benefit the common good, and certainly for the most vulnerable in our society. There are also things our tax dollars go towards that we may not support. Paying taxes is complicated on many levels, and it is easy to get trapped in a conversation regarding the ins and outs, do’s and don’ts, and the rights and wrongs of it all.

The Pharisees and the Herodians were on the opposite ends of the spectrum when it came to the Roman Empire. The Pharisees did not agree with Roman rule and viewed taxes as capitulation to a pagan empire, while the Herodians aligned as a political party supporting the tribute tax to Rome. They did not live in a democratic republic. They did not have a vote, but they did have opinions. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." They came together to test and hopefully defeat their common enemy in Jesus, as they sought to undermine his authority with the people and the power he was gaining. First, they come with flattery, with insincere compliments to butter him up. Jesus saw right through them, knowing they approached with malice in their hearts. They asked him, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" If Jesus said "yes" it would contradict loyalty to God alone, and if he said "no" it would land him in trouble with the Roman Empire. They expected a simple yes or no answer. Jesus didn't play along. Jesus knew it was more complicated than a simple binary solution.

Lutheran theology enjoys paradox, conflict, and "both/and" form of reasoning. We discuss both law and gospel. We believe we are both sinner and saint. It's not one or the other. Life isn't that neat and tidy; that black and white.

Ultimately Jesus responded with a "Both/And", but first he asked to see the coin. The coin was a denarius, and it was used in a typical daily wage. It was Roman money with a graven image of the Emperor: Caesar Augustus, Son of God. That's what it said. The mere existence of the coin mocked the Jewish faith and allegiance to God alone. Jesus pointed to the graven image and asked, "Whose face is this? And whose title?" "Caesar's," they responded. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's." The presence of the coin in the pocket

of these leaders showed exactly how much Roman rule impacted the everyday lives of the people. Jesus acknowledged that in the Roman world, Caesar held authority. AND, Jesus also reminded them Who held the ultimate authority and reign in the kingdom of God. They might walk around with Caesar's face in their pocket, but they walk in God's kingdom. As Amy Frykholm paraphrases, "Jesus offers a subtle and careful commentary on God's economy. So, Caesar printed a coin with his head on it — how does that change the fact that everything already belongs to God?"

Psalm 24:1: says, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it."
We have responsibilities and obligations in the societies in which we live. There are governments and rulers that require payment of a tax. AND, everything we have belongs to God, so we better not make an idol of the first. Not everything is black and white, an easy yes or no. We live in two kingdoms as Martin Luther said. So, what do we do? We live in both, cautious of anything or anyone that seeks greater power or allegiance in our lives than God alone. We "seek first the kingdom of God." We live, as Amy Frykholm encourages, with gratitude and gift, knowing that it all belongs to God.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a Native American botanist and author, identifies something in our own Caesar-based society that she calls the "Windigo economy." The Windigo is a mythical figure in many Native American mythologies who is a greedy, self-absorbed, hungry demon who has to consume everything in sight. Kimmerer sees the Windigo when she looks at how our current market system works. "The market system artificially creates scarcity…The result is famine for some and the disease of excess for others.

The alternative to the Windigo economy is gift and gratitude: “A deep awareness of the gifts of the earth and of each other is medicine. It celebrates cultures of regenerative reciprocity, where wealth is understood to be having enough to share and riches are counted in mutually beneficial relationships." (from Amy Frykholm’s JWJ commentary)

This is what life looks like when we understand everything belongs to God. We see this in our lesson today. The Church in Thessalonica learned to live the way of God’s Kingdom while under the rule of Rome. They were remembered for their work of faith, labor of love and steadfastness of hope. The Apostle Paul writes, “For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. **9** For they report about us, what kind of welcome we had among you and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.” Isn’t that beautiful? Let’s be like the Thessalonians... turning from idols to serve the living and true God. Live in the world and live for God. Both/And

Living as God’s people in the world of empires and kings is complicated. There is not an easy yes or no answer to how we do it. Jesus understood this. He also understood the question did not come from a place of genuine interest or concern, but out of desire to undermine his authority, power and his kingdom way. The leaders had made for themselves an idol- their own status and power. But like the psalmist says,

> Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised;
> he is to be revered above all gods.

[5] For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
[8] Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.

How do we begin to live for God while living in the world? We start by living in gratitude receiving everything as gift. We understand wealth as having enough to share. We acknowledge the idols that seek power and allegiance in our lives and we pursue the one living and true God in Christ. We work out our faith through a labor of love and steadfastness of hope. We live in the world, with all the realities of taxes and politics and empires, remembering that's simply coinage and currency. Everything belongs to the Lord. Everything- so we live for God, bearing the image of our Creator, stamped and sealed with the Holy Spirit. Seeking first the kingdom of God while living in the kingdoms of the world.

Amen