

Proper 24A: Matthew 22:15-22
Church of the Good Shepherd
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Show me the money!

“Who cares what church leaders think?” That was my reaction when I read statements from various churches in response to the heinous attacks on Israel two weeks ago. Our diocese had sent out an email with links to these statements, which themselves said very little beyond that they “condemn violence in the Middle East,” which to my mind is the theological equivalent of “Can’t we all just get along?”

Whenever I read statements like these from church denominations, whether on war or economics or sexuality, I am amazed that the issuers seem to think that politicians today care anything at all about what churches think, as if they were just waiting for Presbyterians or Methodists or Episcopalians to weigh in on the issues of the day. I have yet to hear an elected official of any stripe even acknowledge a social statements from a church body, whether from the US Council of Catholic Bishops or the Southern Baptist Convention, the two largest church bodies in America. And I doubt they even notice our church, what with Episcopalians constituting just half of 1% of the population. But ineffectiveness isn’t the worst concern with these pronouncements. Much more problematic is what these statements say about these church leaders’ understanding of politics, how they see the role of the church in society.

To be sure, the Church has had a complicated history with civil governments, going all the way back to the beginning, to the church’s origins under Roman rule. We might even take it further, tracing the friction to ‘ambiguity’ in the teachings of Jesus himself, to how when asked straightforward political questions, he rarely gave a straight answer. I’m referring, for instance, to our Gospel lesson this morning. Jesus is asked by some religious leaders, “Should we pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Do we accept the legitimacy of Roman rule or not?” Jesus sidesteps the question, declaring, “Give to Caesar what is Caesars and to God what is God’s.” That puts the matter to bed, doesn’t it? No, not really.

Many Christians have nevertheless understood Jesus to mean that there are some things that Christians rightly owe to Caesar, to the government, and there are some things that we rightly owe to God. There are spheres of life where the government has authority but others where God is in charge. Of course there’s still the matter of figuring out what belongs to which authority. But that’s how Jesus’ words are generally understood—as a 1st century version of what we know as separation between church and state.

And after centuries of persecution under Rome, further centuries of conflict between church and crown during the Middle Ages, followed by wars of religion and reciprocal persecution by various denominations of each other, many Christians concluded that such a separation between church and state is indeed best for everyone. And with the founding of the constitutionally secular United States, Christians in America have bought into the idea that we had at last created

a place in which people could worship freely, without threat, a place that was roughly the same as the Kingdom of God, or at least conducive to it, a place where democratic values are synonymous with Christian values.

Whether our country ever achieved this ideal—and I sincerely doubt it did—that ideal is no longer widely shared. Christians in America are now having the odd experience of feeling like missionaries in the very culture we thought we owned. Maybe there was a time when what churches say had influence in society or in politics. Perhaps there was a time when the president didn't just take Christian votes for granted, but was actually interested in a church's insight into some problem. But that is clearly not the case anymore. Whatever influence Christians once had in the affairs of our country, we've lost it.

And this has happened at the same time as religion itself has diminished in the public view. Once referring to a whole way of life, religion in many people's minds has been reduced merely to worship, to what happens on Sunday morning. And even that is considered an elective recreational activity, a matter of private discretion, which we should really keep to ourselves.

If God and Caesar are thought to rule over separate spheres, the sphere of what is God's has shrunk, while the sphere of Caesar, the power of government, has exploded, to the point that the government now not only demands taxes, but also claims the right to say what cars we drive, what stoves we use, or what things we say or write on social media boards. It is truly astounding how religion has retreated while politics has become so all-consuming. It's little wonder, given this shift, that church leaders today feel the need to chime in about political issues. In a world that no longer cares about God, it's the only way to stay relevant, they figure.

But this needn't be. Indeed, I believe that this situation has come about as a result of how Christians have understood Jesus' words in today's passage. For if we accept that there are two separate spheres of authority, where we owe some things to God and others to earthly rulers, then there's nothing stopping those in power from claiming more and more of it, demanding more and more territory for the "secular" (godless) world, asserting more and more control through bureaucratic management and technological proficiency. And the church has by and large given in, hoping that if we appease our critics now, they'll allow us to live in peace on the continuously shrinking bit of land afforded to us.

This is *not* what Jesus envisioned for God's people. In saying to his critics "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," Jesus was not, as is commonly thought, suggesting that there are separate spheres of authority. Jesus was in fact subtly asserting God's *universal* authority and challenging Caesar's claim to really anything. To see how this is, we have to know something about the tax they were arguing about. This tax, the tribute tax, was paid with a Roman coin, a denarius, which was minted with a profile of the Roman emperor on it and inscribed with his name: "Caesar Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus," and on the reverse "Pontifex Maximus" ("Highest Priest").

So this coin was not simply currency but also propaganda, a declaration of Caesar's authority, his claim to rule—son of a god, "divine Augustus," high priest. These titles were of course the very ones that Jesus rightly claimed. Jesus is the very Son of God and High Priest, the mediator

between God and humanity. So the question about what to do with the coin, wasn't simply a matter of whether or not to pay taxes, but about something far more important, about where does their allegiance lie, whose claims do they recognize, who do they worship—Caesar or God.

And let's be clear, Jesus isn't ceding any territory to Caesar, here. As Abraham Kuyper put it: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!" This claim is clear when you consider the words Jesus used in his question about the coin: "whose *image* is on it?" The word "image" *should* have reminded Jesus' critics of the account of humanity's creation in the first chapter of Genesis: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our *image*, and in our *likeness*.' So God created humankind *in his image*, in the *image of God* he created them; male and female he created them." Just as the coin was stamped with the image of Caesar, each person is stamped with the image of God. And so when Jesus says "Give to God what is God's," he is talking about **us**, because we bear God's image. It's not that we owe some things to Caesar and other things to God; we owe God everything, all of who we are, "ourselves, our souls and bodies."

Now, this doesn't solve all the questions we might have about how we are to relate to earthly governments. But it does put politics into perspective. It sets limits to earthly authorities, and challenges the all-consuming, God-like presumptions of the modern state.

And at the same time, it reminds us that the most "political" thing we do as Christians is not to make social statements or to advocate for a cause or even to vote for representatives. No, the most radical, politically significant act we can do is what we're doing right now—worshipping. We worship the true and living God.

It's easy to overlook this, to forget the *political* implications of our gathering, to gloss over the fact that, whenever we come together for worship, what we are doing is we are *pledging allegiance* to a crucified Savior, saying that *he* is the highest good, the highest authority, the solution to all that ails us. *He* is the Messiah, God's Chosen One, not any politician or political party. And we pray a most politically charged prayer, asking that God's will be done, that God's rule will come on earth as in heaven, whether the world's leaders like it or not. And to top it all off, we dare to live out that allegiance in a visible way, as a people who are faithful to their promises, who love their enemies, who tell the truth and honor the poor, who suffer for righteousness, and who thereby testify to the amazing, life-giving power of God.

And we do this, as I said, visibly, publicly. The world wants to reduce the church to a voluntary association like Shriners or the Junior League, useful but not ultimately important. The church however understands itself to have a higher purpose—to be a countercultural political society, a visible alternative to the world's ways of distributing power, seeking justice, and finding the life worth living.

We should not be surprised when what we are, our witness, evokes hostility from the world, because the powers-that-be do not take well to challenges to their authority. And, *by its very existence*, the church *is* a challenge to worldly authority.

You see, it's not that the church *has* a politics, a political agenda; it *is* a politics. From the moment we call Jesus "Lord," rather than simply friend, or teacher, we are making a political claim. It says to those in power: "I see right through you, you pretenders. You're not the boss, you're not in charge, Jesus is."

This is what makes the church so subversive, even revolutionary—not in the sense of wanting to violently overthrow the government, but in the sense that we refuse to play by the rules of our political system: we refuse to believe that the political solutions on offer today are the only solutions, we reject attempts to divide us along lines of race or ethnicity or nationality, and we certainly don't accept the state's claim to be the sole source of our sense of security, that which gives our lives meaning and purpose. And we have no problem saying so, as we point to the true authority, the one in whom we can put our trust, and the way of life he has given us.

As Christians, you see, we are called, not to agitate on the political left or right, not to take stands with or against one political party or another. We are called rather to witness. That is the primary way that the church seeks to influence the world. The most interesting, creative, political solutions we have to offer our troubled society are not new laws, advice to Congress, or increased funding for social programs, however worthy they may be of our support. The most creative social strategy we have to offer is the church. For here we show the world a manner of life the world can never achieve through social coercion or governmental action, a quality of justice that no earthly government can legislate, a depth of community that the world cannot fathom because it does not know God.

It is so much easier, I understand, to divide life into clearly defined categories, religious things and earthly things, places where the government has authority and places where God rules. And it's tempting for us religious leaders to try to use our pulpits to push for social changes we think are needed. (For what good is the church if it's not to help bring about a more just and caring society?) But Jesus' words to his critics today show us that this approach is too limited, its horizon too short. What belongs to God are not just the leftovers from Caesar's table. God claims it all. And he calls us to witness to that reality, to live out as a people a new kind of politics, to be the change we want to see in the world, that is, to embody the Kingdom, God's rule, on earth among ourselves. We cannot change the world, but we can let God change us and through our witness others can see the amazing work God is doing to bring the world to rights. If we are looking for a public statement to make, I don't think you can make a better one than that! Thanks be to God!