



*“Show Me the Money!”*

Matthew 22:15-22

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Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

A well-intentioned woman called me to offer what she thought was a deal I couldn't refuse. It was 1988, an election year, and she was the state chair for the Presidential Campaign of Jack Kemp. She'd just gotten off the phone with Kemp, and he told her he would be glad to come to our church on any Sunday of our choosing to make a short talk.

About twenty red flags sprang up in my mind as I decided what to say in response. Not the least of those flags is a passion for the separation of church and state born of my Baptist upbringing and confirmed by pastoral experience.

Years ago, my friend Wayne Stacy was pastor in a small town in Indiana that annually celebrated “God and Country Sunday.” Wayne never participated to the consternation of some of his parishioners. Finally an obviously frustrated man in the congregation asked him why he didn't participate in “God and Country Sunday.” Wayne said, “Because I know the difference.”

I also know the difference. I asked that well-meaning woman, “What do you suppose Mr. Kemp wants to talk about on a Sunday in church? Would he offer us a testimony of his Christian journey? Does he intend to preach a sermon? What is his purpose? Or does he want to make a campaign speech?” She said she wasn't sure, but thought he'd be trying to convince people to vote for him.

I told her I thought that was a very bad idea for a host of reasons and with tongue firmly in cheek offered a counter-proposal. That year two ordained Baptist ministers were also running for President: Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson. “Why don't we invite each of them to come and preach a sermon?” That seemed more appropriate in church than a campaign speech. She was not amused, and firmly informed me I was behind the times and that I would come to regret my decision.

I didn't live to regret it. I was, perhaps, behind the times. Recently there's been much blurring of the boundary between church and state among conservative Christians and churches.

Actually the mixture of religion and nation is a long tradition. Religious nationalism is part of the human condition. In fact, most nations encourage the local religion to promote the national cause. Cultures wrap their nation in their scripture and mix national agendas with their faith. It's called Civil Religion. From the beginning, Americans have been encouraged by state and church to believe that America has a special divine destiny. Patriotism and faith mix quite naturally on American soil and in American hearts.

In today's Gospel Lesson, Jesus challenges all civil religions, including our own. The lesson comes at an appropriate time. Our national election is just weeks away, and Jesus' words offer a necessary perspective about religion and politics.

Jesus was in Jerusalem, the capital of the nation. He'd become a political problem. His message was clear and a threat to the powers-that-be. He boldly claimed that God was establishing a new kingdom on earth and that all other claims of allegiance must recede behind God's claim. He invited everyone to join this new commonwealth under God.

That proclamation sent a shudder through the political system. Jesus seemed dangerously independent of harsh political realities in Jerusalem. With great difficulty, the leaders of the nation had come to terms with Roman occupation and rule. The Jesus movement threatened that delicate status quo.

As always, the different political parties disagreed about how to deal with Rome. The Herodians, the major power in Jerusalem, counseled compliance with and obedience to the Romans. In return, the Romans let the Herodians control the Temple and religious life in the capital. Keep quiet, pay your taxes, and leave well enough alone, was their credo.

The Pharisees, whose power lay outside the capital, protested Roman rule and protested the Herodian accommodation. They wanted to clean up the corrupt capital and run the Romans out of town. Resist the occupying power, protest the unjust tax system, and agitate until we are free, was their platform.

Both parties, for very different reasons, agreed that Jesus had to go. He was dangerous and a threat to the nation. They agreed to try to trap Jesus with a politically volatile question.

The question was about taxes, a big deal in any political system and every election year. One thing was certain, the tax system was burdensome, unfair and counterproductive. In addition to the ordinary Jewish tax system — ten percent plus other taxes, plus an annual Temple tax — the Romans added another fifteen percent tax in income tax, a custom tax on all goods and services, and an annual head tax. The tax system was a crushing burden in a relatively poor country. "Give us our daily bread" was no mere morning prayer — it was a large act of faith.

It was the head tax that was the most controversial and resented. The amount was not much: one day's wages. However, the tax had to be paid in Roman coin. That inflamed the Jewish populace. That coin was, to Jewish minds, a blasphemous affront to the nation. On the coin was an image of the Emperor, Caesar Tiberius. That in itself was a violation of the second commandment forbidding graven images. Worse, however, was the inscription on the coin, "Tiberius, August Son of the Divine Augustus." That was blasphemy.

When Jesus was a boy, the tax was so inflammatory, a group of Jews attempted to overthrow the Romans — and failed. After Jesus' death, the nation rose up again in revolt over the head tax. The Romans ruthlessly crushed the revolution and Israel ceased to exist until 1948.

This tax was no small deal, and the authorities thought they could trap Jesus in the controversy. You know the story. "Should we pay the head tax or not?" It was a "gotcha" question. If Jesus said, "Yes, pay the tax," the Pharisees would accuse him of idolatry and blasphemy, a capital offense in Jewish law. If he said, "No," the Herodians would accuse him of insurrection, a capital offense in Roman law.

Jesus' answer is classic – and profound. “Show me the money,” he said. “Any of you have a denarius?” Someone handed him the coin, and Jesus asked, “Whose image in on the coin?”

The answer was, of course, Caesar Tiberius. “Well, then,” Jesus said, “render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and render to God what is God’s.”

Christians have been working on the answer ever since. It seems at the least what Jesus is saying is that if we participate in the system provided by Caesar, we have an obligation to Caesar. “Do you use Roman roads?” Jesus might have asked. “If so, then pay the Romans.” “Do you use the running water and sewage system provided by Rome? If so, pay your taxes.” “Do you accept the law and order with which Rome protects you? Then pay the tax.”

If we participate in Caesar’s world, we owe Caesar what it costs to create that world. Taxation is legitimate and good. That is clear. But there is a larger issue. What belongs to God alone? What are the limits of allegiance to the state? What claim does Caesar have on the rest of my life?

It seems Jesus is telling his disciples we should be very clear about what we owe to the state and what we owe to God. They are not the same.

I pause here and add that the rest of the New Testament (and the Old Testament too in its own way) teach that the state is necessary and good. Our tradition, the Reformed Tradition, regards the existence of the state one of the orders of creation. We owe the state obedience, taxes, and honor, according to St. Paul (Romans 13:1-7). Peter sums it up more simply, “Fear God and honor the emperor” (1 Peter 2:17).

However, Scripture also warns that the state is a power, and like all powers, state power tends toward corruption and abuse of its God-given power. All powers lean toward idolatry, self-worship, and self-justification. In fact, in the book of Revelation the state – Rome – is a demonic power. It has exceeded its divine function, corrupted itself, and has become a false religion and stands under God’s judgment.

When any state identifies with any ideology, whether political, economic or religious, it takes on religious form. Its evil inevitably multiplies and whatever it does, even evil, the state considers to be good. Others, especially those in opposition to state power, are the enemy, and must be crushed.

America is not exempt from this religious nationalism. Early in our history, Manifest Destiny became a state policy. We have a divine mission from God, and whatever we do to accomplish that mission is legitimate. We stole land that belonged to others, engaged in near genocide, waged wars of conquest, and occupied sovereign lands in the name of that Manifest Destiny. And any disagreement was deemed “unpatriotic.”

The second Minister of this church, Lyman Abbott, was a leading clergyman of his day, and like many liberal American pastors at the time, wrapped the Bible in an American flag and believed firmly in that Manifest Destiny.

At the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Abbott wrote:

“[This war] is the fulfillment of American Destiny. We do not want more territory, but God does not permit a choice. This imperialism of liberty is the fulfillment of American destiny...a destined part of the evolutionary process...a noble stage in the development of human brotherhood.” Later he called World War I “a divine crusade, furnishing evidence of the power of Christianity” (in John Von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*, pp. 347-348).

More recently, American Civil Religion has summed itself up crudely, “My country, right or wrong.” Anyone who disagrees is either not patriotic or anti-American or both.

Civil Religion in all its forms, American, British, Russian, etc., is dangerous. Inevitably, religious nationalism blinds the moral sense. Ethics is always subordinated to the nation. Civil Religion distorts the biblical vision of God and the kingdom of God – and distorts one’s vision of his/her nation, too.

The church exists to challenge Caesar, not to promote him. In history the false prophets always flatter the king and tell Caesar what Caesar wants to hear. Capitals always have court chaplains who do not tell the powers-that-be the truth.

Jesus’ point is, above all else, do not give to Caesar what belongs to God. Jesus could have handed the coin back and said, “Whose image do you bear?” The answer is, of course, we humans bear God’s stamp, God’s image, deep in our souls. We belong to God, not Caesar.

Later in this same chapter of Matthew, Jesus repeats the great commandment. The one thing required by God above all else is that we love God with our entire being and our neighbor as ourselves. For the children of God, our primary allegiance is to our creator. All other allegiances, and there will be many, including the nation, all other allegiances are secondary and provisional.

The one thing Caesar cannot have is you. Our souls, our consciences, our wills belong to God alone. Jesus lived and died by that one great allegiance. Neither the Jewish state, the Roman Empire, nor any political party received his allegiance or claimed his conscience.

He calls us to be a people, a community in the world, but independent of the world. This community creates space that belongs to God exclusively. Here Caesar has no ultimate claim. Every Sunday, our worship reminds us that God is the Lord. Our songs, texts, prayers, and conversations belong to God.

Jesus’ words about God and Caesar complicate life. He calls us to take great care with our allegiances. They are always confusing.

Several years ago a team of Emory University psychologists studied people engaged in partisan politics. They noticed that in partisan political work, people react like sports fans during games. Endorphins flood the body and perception is altered. Bad things are the result of bad referees. Partisans and sports fans arrange the facts and environment to fit their prior commitment.

Their conclusion is worth noting. “In politics we have to make an effort to avoid self-deception.”

When we pray, “Thy kingdom come...on earth,” we are submitting to God’s mighty claim on us. Prayed with thought, that phrase clarifies and challenges all our assumptions and allegiances.

God calls us to participate in God’s agenda on earth – “thy will be done.” If God’s will is justice for every person, peace on earth, righteousness in public and private, if God’s will is to eliminate violence, poverty and corruption, then election year consequences surely follow.

What candidate, what platform, what party, most clearly promotes God’s agenda? As a Christian I ask further, if Jesus Christ is God’s revelation of God’s will on earth, what candidate, platform, and party sound most like Jesus? I do not think for a minute that America – or any other nation – can claim kingdom of God status. But I am convinced that Christians bear the grave responsibility of doing God’s will on earth, no matter what.

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The good news is that God's cause is not linked to any nation, political party, or economic system. Our destiny lies in the hands of God, and we are members of a kingdom not made with human hands, a kingdom already in play and which is coming. "Thy kingdom come – on earth."

Amen.

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