

Whose Image? Which God?

Matthew 22:15-22

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, (Oct. 18) 2020

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*But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed,*

*You're gonna have to serve somebody.*

*It may be the devil or it may be the Lord,*

*But you're gonna have to serve somebody.*

- Bob Dylan

Today's Gospel lesson from Matthew is one the lectionary chooses for us, which is to say, I didn't pick it. Here is a scripture talking to us about how we Christians deal with the state, with old Caesar, and it is only about two weeks before the election. I did not choose this. It was chosen for us.

Today, we hear Jesus' oft-quoted words, in response to the trick question from the Pharisees and the Herodians, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?," and Jesus responds, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Or as the old KJV says, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

Like all the recent texts we have been hearing from Matthew's Gospel, this one needs some context and background explanation. Jews in first century Judea paid a lot of taxes and they despised this particular one – called the Imperial Tax, because it required as a tribute to Rome to support the Roman Empire's occupation of Israel. In other words, they were paying their oppressors to oppress them!

Of course, not everyone saw the tax that way. For example, there were the Herodians, so named because either they were related to and/or supportive of King Herod, the so-called ruler, who was a puppet of Rome, and therefore, believed that working with the Empire was the best way to get things done. The Herodians supported the Imperial Tax. The Pharisees, on the other hand, another religious-political group, hated the Imperial Tax. They were reform minded but knew one had to go along to get along.

The Imperial Tax was opposed by most of the common people, including Jesus' followers. Many believed that Judea would be great again when it was an independent Judea, and therefore, hated the Imperial Tax since it daily reminded them of their humiliation and domination by the Roman Empire.

The Imperial Tax should have been a problem for the Pharisees, for religious reasons beyond the political reasons. The Romans coins were engraved with an image of the Emperor Caesar Tiberius and a proclamation of his divinity – “Kurios Kaisar” “Caesar is Lord” – which broke the first two commandments!

So, it is interesting that these two groups – the Herodians and the Pharisees – who normally hated one another, and who opposed one another on Rome and Rome's tax, united against Jesus. They came together to figure out how to trap Jesus and discredit him in front of the crowds who loved Jesus. If Jesus advocated paying this tax, he would disappoint his followers and most of the crowds who came to Jesus' to hear him teach. If Jesus advocated not paying this tax, he would be in trouble with the Roman rulers. They thought they had him!

But, as we know, Jesus not only evaded their trap, he trapped them in their own question. He asked for a coin, and it is interesting that Jesus did not have one

of his own. The Herodians and Pharisees reached into their pockets and pulled out their own coins, perhaps forgetting that by showing a coin with the Emperor's image on it, they betrayed their own complicity with the Roman system. Then Jesus asked, "Whose face is on the coin?" "The Emperor's," they answered. Everyone in attendance knew the commandments and they knew that Jesus had just trapped the trappers in their own blasphemy according to Jewish law!

And that makes Jesus' response even more biting – "Give, therefore, to Caesar, the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Jesus turned the tables on his questioners. With just a few words, Jesus revealed the truth about his would-be accusers and at the same time, in front of everyone reminded them of their higher calling to serve God.

Jesus was reminding everyone that you show me whose image you treasure, and I'll show you which God you worship. You can be full of God-talk, quote scripture, say loud prayers, and be in church every Sunday but when you have the emperor's image, the image of the state, in your pocket, be careful! You're on the road to worshipping the state with the state being your god. It is very easy to move from carrying the image of Caesar to becoming the image of Caesar, and seeing everyone else in the image of Caesar, instead of seeing each other as the image of God. Be careful.

Singer/song-writer Bob Dylan has a song from several years ago that says, "But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed,/ You're gonna have to serve somebody./ It may be the devil or it may be the Lord,/ But you're gonna have to serve somebody."

Or in the words from of our Gospel reading this morning, “Every one of us has to serve somebody and it may be the old Caesar (the state) or it may be the Lord, but it’s going to be somebody.” Beware.

A simple reading of this text is for us to give to Caesar what belongs to him and to give to God what belongs to him. Pay your taxes, obey the laws, do your duty, and so on. Of course, the challenge is to discern what belongs to whom. And here is the bigger challenge: who decides what belongs to whom? Does God decide or does Caesar decide?

One of the ways we Christians have read this in history and read it today is called the “two kingdoms,” which means that God has ordained from Creation that there are two means God governs the world. First, God rules through the state, the temporal, by way of political leaders, laws, bringing order, governing institutions, armies, and so on. At the same time, God rules spiritually through the church, which is about salvation, prayer, worship, and so on. Of course, the practical result has been that the spiritual becomes narrowed to a privatized and individualistic spirituality that emphasizes “Jesus is in my heart” while everything else that is public and social and lived out is determined by the state.

One of the most pernicious examples of this is Nazi Germany, where good German Lutherans could faithfully go to church and pray on Sunday, while going along with the Nazi state because they believed that’s the way God set up the governance of the world.

Several months ago, I testified in front of the Nacogdoches City Commission in favor of a citizen’s oversight board for the police department. I was

followed by a person who testified against police oversight saying that God ordained the state and the state's laws, therefore our job is to obey the law, every law and any law. Since I spoke before him, I did not have an opportunity to ask about the laws we used to have supporting slavery, or segregation, for example. My guess is that the fellow who spoke believed deeply in Jesus and was in church most every Sunday but come Monday and the rest of the week everything was up to Caesar. He reminded me that many of us are tempted to compartmentalize our lives so we can say, set aside our financial offering to God, but everything else belongs to me and to Caesar. Or we can love God in our hearts but participate in injustice during the week and never see any conflict between the two. There are all sorts of ways we compartmentalize our lives so that God rules only the most interior and private and individual, leaving everything else up to Caesar and ourselves.

Discerning what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God is among the most important things we Christians are to do. How do we decide which laws are just and right and which ones are unjust and wrong? Do we simply give the state a blank check? Do we always support Caesar and give him whatever he wants no matter what kind of Caesar we have? And as I mentioned, who decides such matters? Where is the line between God and Caesar and who draws the line?

The key is to remember when Jesus said, "Render unto God that which is God's." Which raises the question, or should raise the question, for those of us who seek to follow Jesus: what belongs to God? Or rather, what does not belong to God? When we give our lives to Jesus Christ, we give all of our lives to Christ. Not just some of it, while the rest goes to Caesar. Our entire bodies go through baptism, not just parts.

We also acknowledge and confess that Jesus is Lord of all – the entire cosmos. There are not some areas we sub-contract to Caesar or to mega-corporations. A few years ago when we opposed the TransCanada KXL tarsands pipeline, we held up signs “The Earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein” from Psalm 24:1, to say to them, as well as remind ourselves, that all of this Earth is God’s, not TransCanada’s.

There are not two distinctly defined kingdoms or realms divided between God and Caesar. Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

In 1934, in Nazi Germany, some (a few) pastors gathered in the face of the Nazi totalizing domination of all of life including the German church. The Nazis proclaimed that the revelation and word of God was in and through Hitler and German blood and country. In defiance, the great theologian Karl Barth wrote what is known as the Barmen Declaration. Article One said: *Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.*

*We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognize as a source of its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures and truths as God’s revelation. (In other words, we do not recognize Hitler as a source of God’s word.)*

Article Two said: *As Jesus Christ is God’s comforting pronouncement of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, with equal seriousness, he is also God’s vigorous announcement of his claim upon our whole life.*

*We reject the false doctrine that there could be areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ but to other lords, areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him. (In other words, all of life belongs to Jesus Christ, not Hitler.)*

Several years later Barth wrote an essay in which he gave a helpful image for us to think about this morning. Barth said that Christ is at the center of two concentric circles. The smaller circle is the Christian community, the church, Christ's followers who recognize Jesus Christ is Lord and seek to live the Way of Jesus. The larger circle is the wider civic community and even though Christ is still at the center, the civic community does not necessarily recognize it. We Christ followers are engaged most specifically in Christian community, immersing ourselves in the Way of Jesus. But the Way of Jesus calls us out into the wider circle, being witnesses to Christ by serving, healing, seeking justice, working for peace, and reconciling the world with God, with each other, and with Creation (Karl Barth, "The Christian Community and the Civil Community" in *Community, Church, and State: Three Essays*, p. 149-189).

Depending on old Mr. Caesar and the kind of wider circle we're in, how we Christians witness might vary. So perhaps much of the time, we see no major conflict with Caesar and the wider world. We obey the laws and so on, all the while witnessing to the God we know in Christ, demonstrating to the wider circle that there is much more to be and do. Because of Jesus, we do not carry guns and we will refuse to kill one another because God has reconciled the world and our calling is to live out what God has done and is doing. We witness to God's compassion and love of those who are hungry by feeding them, by those suffering illness and grief, by healing and comforting. On and on – all various ways we

witness in the wider circle of the civic community and in the midst of what Caesar would consider his realm.

But there might be times, when our witness is more contrarian. For example, there are times when the Emperor says like in the book of Daniel (chap. 3), “Everyone must bow to my image,” and we join Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego by standing. Or perhaps Caesar says, “The law is if you are black you must sit in the back of the bus,” and therefore, we join Rosa Parks by sitting in the front of the bus. Or Caesar’s police are shooting and choking young black men, therefore, instead of honoring such a Caesar, we take a knee. Whether we are standing, sitting, or taking a knee, we also know there are repercussions from challenging Caesar, and here’s the deal – as followers of the suffering servant Jesus, we must be willing to live with the repercussions. We may face social estrangement or worse, we may go to jail or who knows. But whatever happens we make a witness to Christ.

Or perhaps we vote. And we might even run for office. In the face of efforts at voter suppression and intimidation, I remember the witness of Fannie Lou Hamer, the black sharecropper in the Mississippi Delta, who persisted and persisted until she was registered to vote. As a result, she was arrested, jailed, beaten until almost dead, losing sight in one eye, and suffering permanent kidney damage that eventually contributed to her death some years later. Fannie Lou Hamer voted and so am I. Or John Lewis almost killed at Selma over the right to vote. John Lewis voted and eventually was elected to Congress and therefore, I’m voting. Or C.T. Vivian knocked down the steps of the courthouse for trying to vote. C.T. Vivian voted and so am I.

We vote, we sit, we stand, we take a knee, we march, we organize, we pray and participate in vigils. We feed the hungry, visit the sick, and care for the Earth.

We practice justice and reconciliation. We love our neighbors, including our neighbors' children by paying taxes for public schools and wearing masks and calling our police to be just. And when Caesar builds walls and separates children from their parents in detention centers down on the border, we stand up and say, "The people of God do not have borders! We stand against your bigotry and violence; we stand against walls!" And then we find ways to build bridges, bring healing, and we care for those who suffer. Or Caesar says, it is perfectly fine for Pay Day lenders to charge people 400% interest on loans. "It's all about capitalism and making money." Well, perhaps we say, "We do not accept your definition. We believe it is wrong and unjust and if you're not going to help by passing just laws, we'll organize and raise money among all the churches and out-compete you. We'll loan money at a just rate. Meanwhile, we'll help organize to outvote you."

In two weeks is election day. Early voting has already begun for President, U.S. Senators, Congress and on down to local races. I know and you know this election is big and important. But I want you to remember, that no matter how the election turns out and no matter what happens, our calling is to be a witness. We witness to the reconciling and redeeming Way of Christ Jesus no matter who gets elected Caesar.

Back in the early 1980's, when I was in my 20's, I was in Nashville driving my mentor Will Campbell to one place or another. I kept asking Will about political involvement. He said, "I'm involved in politics and I believe in political engagement but be careful. Don't let Mr. Caesar define what that engagement looks like. Besides, you know Mr. Caesar tends to be confusing or is outright lying" (This sounds eerily like today). Will went on, "There are many ways of being politically engaged besides what Caesar says. Politics, especially Republicans and Democrats, is sort of like following the Atlanta Braves. I'm

involved, I'm well-informed and keep up with them. But at the end of the day, I don't take the Atlanta Braves too seriously. Same with politics.”

So, after Election Day let's remember. We do not take it too seriously. We are going to be involved and engaged one way or another. Mr. Caesar thinks the world revolves around him. It doesn't.

Jesus Christ is Lord. He is the center.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.