

God Over All
Matthew 22:15-21
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, October 19, 2008

At the tail end of a long political campaign, today's gospel lesson comes at an opportune time. It's a story of politics as usual. The Pharisees and Herodians, unlikely co-conspirators, attempting to trap Jesus with the cynical question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?"

The Pharisees and Herodians were "unlikely co-conspirators" and their question was "cynical" because both were poles apart on the political/religious spectrum. The Pharisees were kind of the religious right wingers of their day and completely opposed to Roman rule. The Herodians were roughly equivalent to today's secular leftists, proponents of big government and champions of Roman rule. These two factions despised each other but since "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" they partnered together to take Jesus down.

Our appreciation for this story can only be enhanced when we consider the political climate during Jesus' lifetime. Like today, there were conflicting constituencies struggling for control. There were the Roman invaders who ruled with an iron fist, the Pharisees, who advocated Jewish separation from Roman rule and culture, the Herodians (supporters of King Herod) who collaborated with Rome in every way conceivable for wealth and power in return and finally the Sadducees, the temple priests who tolerated Roman rule as long as they were free to run the temple without outside interference.

These intense rivalries brewed the perfect storm climaxing in Jesus' crucifixion. All these groups opposed each other, but their fear of Jesus forced an uneasy alliance against this authoritative therefore dangerous rabbi from Nazareth.

It's essential to realize Jesus' crucifixion didn't happen in a political vacuum. Jesus' crucifixion, and all acts of injustice committed before and since, are the consequence of cynical political decisions made without regard for the authority of God. That's precisely when governments conceive and enforce unjust policies and laws, when the authority of God is mocked and rejected.

Two blatant examples of this blatant rebellion can be found in recent history. Both Nazi Germany and Communist Russia declared their independence from the Christian God. Lenin lectured, "Religion is the opiate of the masses." Hitler boasted, "We are the new pagans." The consequence of these anti God political movements: the murder of tens of millions of innocent people. The murderers themselves defended their policies claiming, "It's better for some to die for the greater good." Amazingly, they believed they were doing the right thing. How? Because their higher power wasn't the Highest Power. For them God was a dangerous fairy tale who threatened their will to power. So they pretended God didn't matter and declared themselves their own gods.

Sometimes we fool ourselves thinking the first and second commandments are outmoded and don't apply anymore. "I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me... You shall not make for yourself an idol... You shall not bow down before them or worship them..." (Exodus 20:2-5)

But just because the ancients were superstitious and believed in many gods doesn't mean we're so sophisticated we've outgrown polytheism. Our "other gods" created in our own image are just as alluring and real, leaving us believing we really don't need God's guidance.

We live in a republic with the national motto, "In God We Trust." Unfortunately we can sadly agree our nation didn't always trust God, otherwise Native Americans wouldn't have been mistreated, Africans would never have been enslaved and prejudice would never have been institutionalized. Fortunately we can proudly remember the times past injustices were righted, because brave and committed people, usually Christian, rendered to God the things that belong to God and worked tirelessly for peace and justice. The movements ending the slave trade and abolishing slavery were led by Christians. The fight for better working conditions in factories and better living conditions in slums, the Civil Rights movement and advocacy for peace and the culture of life, all led by Christians. Christian disciples, willing to stand up against the powerful vested interests who worked just as hard for the status quo. They were even willing to break unjust laws, and face prison, because they could only bow down to the highest power and render to God the things which belong to God.

Paradoxically sometimes Christians find themselves on both sides of the same issue. For example, some Christians are pacifists and oppose all wars period. Then there are Christians who subscribe to what St. Augustine called "the just war theory." Both groups make compelling arguments for their positions and both sides make compelling arguments against the other's position. But here's where they are the same, they both test their convictions through honest prayer and study of scripture. Both submit themselves to the highest authority they know trusting God is leading them, maybe on different paths of the same journey trusting that because of or in spite of their convictions God's will is done.

So what suggestions or guidelines can help you be more intentional rendering to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God all that belongs to God?

First this: "Rendering" isn't a 50/50 proposition. Caesar only gets his share if Caesar isn't opposing God's will. Let me repeat that, your allegiance to Caesar cannot compromise your allegiance to God. If Caesar demands you do something Jesus would refuse to do, don't do it. If there's a law on the books that dehumanizes others or restricts their unalienable rights, the least you should do is let your legislators know you oppose the law. When you have the opportunity to vote for a candidate or an issue question that compromises what you believe to be right, don't vote for it, even if it's in your best interest. And here's a related rule of thumb, don't vote your pocketbook if it's at the expense of others more vulnerable than you. And never vote for a candidate just because you identify with one party. Pray before you vote. And certainly exercise your right to vote. It's not only your right or even your obligation, it's a sacred duty you dare not take for granted. Think of the billions of people living today who can only dream of free and fair elections. If that doesn't get you to the polls nothing will.

We are blessed to be citizens of a constitutional republic whose vision is liberty and justice for all. We don't always live up to that vision because though we are a great nation in the words of St. Paul, we are still sinners and fall short of the glory of God. Which leads me to my last suggestion: Remember this always: yes, you are a citizen of a

great and powerful nation, but even more important you are citizen of the Kingdom of God and he shall reign for ever and ever.

Jesus was a master teacher, always seizing each teaching moment given him. He was Spirit inspired when, after asked if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar he asked for that coin. “Whose head and title is this?” Jesus asked. They answered, “The Emperor’s; Caesar’s.”

Can you imagine Jesus, the Son of God, holding that coin engraved with the image of a flawed, foolish man who claimed to be a god? Ironic isn’t it? The Son of God was crucified in the name of the emperor god. And who of the two do we remember and celebrate today?

Sure, give to Caesar his due, but give to God all you have to give.