

Faith & Politics, Church & State

*A Reflection Preached by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver at
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Mark 12:13-17

Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. And they came and said to him, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?' But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, 'Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.' And they brought one. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Jesus said to them, 'Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' And they were utterly amazed at him.

Though our denomination, the United Church of Christ, is not even yet six decades old, our worship tradition is as old as the American story, dating right back to the beginning of our nation's history with the arrival in Massachusetts Bay of the Pilgrims, and then the Puritans. They were Dissenters from the Established Church, Congregationalists to the core.

They came here to New England to found a Godly community, one where the church and her people would not be corrupted by a wider, fallen society. They did not cross the Atlantic in search of some vague concept of religious freedom but to create a new political order that reflected and protected their particular beliefs.

And so first in Massachusetts, and then throughout the region, towns were founded, each with its own Congregational church at the center of the community; the affairs of state and church were closely entwined. The congregational meeting gave form to the town meeting; and the meetinghouse was often where those exercises in local democracy took place. People paid taxes, including one dedicated to the support of the Established Church. Congregationalists were dissenters no longer; they were The Man.

"Separation of church and state? What a bizarre idea!" our Congregational forebears would have thought. "The two are intimately related."

At the very least, they were mixed up together, sometimes comfortably, sometimes uneasily.

One notable way this was manifested was in the election sermon, in which the minister would declaim on the candidates running for office and the issues dominating debate. People would listen to their pastor's words. Sometimes, they'd even heed them.

Now, fear not. I do not plan to endorse any candidates today. Nor will I preach on how you ought to vote on ballot questions that are being put before the electorate. I will not do either of these things for three reasons:

First, I'm not going to jeopardize our church's tax-exempt status, something I'd be doing, at least in theory, if I were to wade in to partisan waters while in this pulpit. Though compelling arguments can be made that communities of faith shouldn't accept special tax status from the government, no pastor, especially of the Congregationalist variety, should ever resolve to act on such a belief on his or her own. To do so would go against the very idea of the pastor being part of the covenantal community he or she serves.

Second, I may not be perfect, but I'm not stupid. I know some of you are Democrats, and some of you are Republicans. Then there are those who are what we once referred to as independents, but now call 'unenrolled voters'. Touch on political topics in a partisan fashion, and I'd be sure to displease, if not downright anger and alienate, a portion of our church community.

Third, and this is by far the most important reason of all: I'm not called to do for you that which each of us is called to do on his or her own—discern how to apply what has been called by Lamar Williamson, Jr. Jesus' "authoritative yet ambiguous" teaching on the payment of taxes.

That may surprise you. Isn't it the job of the preacher to illuminate the text, to provide some exegesis of the morning lesson? Well, yes, and that's what I'm doing right now. But think of this morning's reflection as being part of a do-it-yourself kit. I'll tell you what the parts in the box are, but you'll do the assembly.

"But why this approach?" you wonder.

Well, that's the beauty of what Jesus offers here. Recall what happened in this morning's lesson: Jesus is approached by some Pharisees, those familiar antagonists from the world of religious life, and Herodians, a rarely-mentioned political faction, whose shared goal was to entrap him. Nothing new here. But this time his opponents are rather clever. They've formulated a question that seems bound to get Jesus into trouble. If he condones the payment of taxes to Caesar, an act that was despised by the Jews for reasons both political—a people yearning for independence had no desire to pay the bills of distant Rome—and theological—the depiction of Tiberius Caesar on coins was understood by many to be a violation of the Second Commandment's prohibition of graven images, he'll forfeit his credibility. But if Jesus rejects the taxing power of the Empire, he'll have committed a crime. Either way, he'll be compromised, put out of commission, no longer able to roil the waters.

Jesus, of course, sees an alternative and in doing so not only confounds some opponents with a clever answer, but also offers you and me, indeed anyone who claims to be a disciple, with a provocative way to look at faith and politics.

Perhaps upon hearing today's New Testament reading you began to ponder just how one is supposed to know exactly what is Caesar's and what is God's. It's not as if Jesus offers any specific formula. He doesn't explain that, say, 49% is Caesar's, and 51% is God's. He doesn't offer a facile, if religiously tidy, ratio of 0% Caesar, 100% God. And, much to Caesar's disappointment, he doesn't say the reverse: 100% to Caesar, 0% to God.

So what are we to do? How are to proceed?

Go back to that denarius, that little coin bearing the image of Tiberius Caesar, the Emperor who reigned in Jesus' day. Coinage, then as now, was not just a facilitator of economic activity; it was an expression of political identity and assertion of political power. By using the sovereign's currency, whether it's a coin minted in ancient Rome or a banknote printed in modern-day America, one is ascribing legitimacy to that authority. One is saying, "I believe that the one who issued this money has the ability to back it up. I may not care for this government, but I accept that it is for real."

Yet, consider this: in this story, it's not only the coins that bear a likeness. The people do, too. Remember Genesis 1.27? "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them," we are told. So, while currency may attest to the rule of Caesar, our very beings testify to a greater power, one that pervades every aspect of our existence.

I believe that in this passage, Jesus isn't simply being cagey. Rather, he's pointing to a reality of life: we live in communities and in doing so, we participate in a political system. While we do that, while we are subjects or citizens, however, we are also always children of God. This is of especial importance to remember in this time, this place, as you and I are effectively Caesar. While in two days' time Barack Obama or Mitt Romney will win a hard-fought election and with it the perks of office like working in the Oval Office, flying on Air Force One, and being driven around in an armored limousine, you and I will remain the ultimate source of political power in this country. When our president, governors, legislators, judges, and city councilors act, they do so in our names, and on our behalf. Constitutionally, there is no "we and they" in terms of government in the United States; we, the people, are the government. We, the people, are Caesar.

And so, if we are the government, and we are also always God's, what are we to do with regard to the political process?

For starters, vote. And vote with our ballots being informed by our faith.

If ever the notion that while church may be about Sunday, Christianity is about the entire week were true, it is now. When you and I are pulling levers or filling out ovals, we should be doing so with our faith present and shaping our choices. That doesn't mean that we subject our candidates to religious tests and it doesn't mean that we should choose individuals who would impose our preferred version of the faith on the community. As American Christians we should lift up the notion of separation of Church and State; we need only compare the vitality of religious life in our country with that in nations with state-sanctioned churches. That said, church and state are not the same thing as faith and politics.

As Christians, we are called to bring our faith into our consideration of the political issues of the day. How can we do otherwise if we are to truly follow the Way of Jesus? How can we truly claim to be disciples of Christ if we deem our faith to be irrelevant to how we approach such a significant part of our lives?

So, when we vote on Tuesday, I hope we will do so with gratitude, offering thanks for the blessing of living in a country where we elect our leaders and thanks that God has called on us as his faithful people to wrestle with Scripture and its application to our lives and choices.

I hope we will do so seeing that our votes are not just an act of civic engagement, but as something sacred, something we do not just as citizens of the United States, but also as Christians living faithfully in the kingdom of God.

And I hope we will do so, mindful to give to Caesar what is Caesars, and God, what is God's.