

20 PENTECOST A17 (St. Thomas New Haven)

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” In this morning’s Gospel lesson the Pharisees present this as a simple “yes or no” question. However, their own position on the matter is far from neat and clean. You see, the Pharisees were *theologically opposed* to paying taxes to Caesar, since any such payments had to be made in *Roman* currency bearing Caesar’s *image* and proclaiming him to be *divine*. This was something that no devout Jew could countenance. On the other hand, the Pharisees were not exactly eager to clash with the Roman authorities who mostly let them fly under the radar, so they swallowed their principles and paid tribute to the emperor, all the while avoiding posing to *themselves* the question they so eagerly put to Jesus.

The Pharisees, we are told, were accompanied by “Herodians,” which presumably refers to followers of King Herod. Now Herod was a front man and a lap dog for the Roman Empire, so we can safely assume that his supporters thought that paying taxes to Caesar was a perfectly fine idea. Thus the Herodians and the Pharisees were rather strange bedfellows, bound together mostly by their suspicion and fear of Jesus of Nazareth.

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Bear in mind that the “law” in question was the *religious* law, in particular the five books of Moses. Now you don’t have to be a bible scholar to conclude that filling the coffers of the

empire with currency bearing the likeness of Caesar and proclaiming him to divine – that such a thing just might run afoul of the 10 Commandments, in particular the first two: “You shall have no other gods before me;” and “You shall not make for yourself any graven image.”

Rather than address this issue head on, Jesus says to Pharisees, “Show me the coin used for the tax.” The Pharisees dutifully bring him a denarius. Jesus holds it between his thumb and forefinger and asks: “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answer, “the Emperor Tiberius.” Jesus then responds: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s.”

Had Jesus stopped there, he would have won the day based on *cleverness* alone. He seemed to be saying: “Hey, the emperor’s face is on the coin so it must belong to him. You should probably return it to him. You might even get a reward.” It is as if I came across a driver’s license on the sidewalk, and on it was the name and image of, oh I don’t know, Keri Aubert. I would reasonably conclude that the license belonged to her, and that I should figure out how to get it back to her.

But Jesus does not stop there. After saying “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s,” he says: “and [give] to God the things that are God’s.” “And give to God the things that are God’s.” *What* things? *What* things might I stumble across that belong to *God*? Jesus does not say, but the clear implication is that we should render to God those things that bear *God’s*

likeness, those things that are made in *the image* of God, including you, and me, and all of humanity.

The Pharisees were amazed, and no doubt frustrated. Jesus had escaped the trap they had set for him. He had said nothing, while managing to convey *everything*. He had acknowledged the temporal authority of the emperor, while alluding to the overarching and all-encompassing authority of *God*. And in making this *distinction*, Jesus makes the theological conundrum disappear by tacitly removing Caesar's claimed divinity from the equation.

Realizing they had been bested, his tormenters slinked away with their tails between their legs.

Some Biblical scholars view Jesus's response to the Pharisees and the Herodians as laying the groundwork for the modern doctrine of separation of church and state. They understand Jesus to be saying that religious life and civic life are separate and distinct realms, each of which imposes its own demands, and offers its own rewards. As much as possible, each realm should remain separate from the other, and people who are citizens of both should somehow switch allegiances every time they cross the invisible boundary between them.

That is perhaps a bit overstated, but you get the idea. But here's the thing. Jesus does not come anywhere close to supporting such a notion. Although he

distinguishes between the obligations we owe to Caesar and the things we owe to God, and even though he suggests that each *sovereign* is entitled to its due, Jesus does not address what happens when realms collide or obligations conflict. He does not say whether the boundaries between church and state are rigid or porous, fixed or mutable. And he does not tell us how our dual citizenship is to be lived out. In this morning's gospel lesson, the *only* advice Jesus gives us is to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and render unto God that which is God's. All the difficult questions remain unanswered.

Thankfully, the gospels as a whole are far more enlightening. Now it would take me way more time than I have this morning, or in a month of this mornings, to *spell out* what the Gospels have to say about religion and politics, or about religious life and civic life. So the best I can do is to offer a few highlights. For openers, religious life does not exclude civic engagement. That much is clear even in this morning's lesson. Neither the Law of Moses nor the great commandments of the New Testament prohibit giving Caesar his due.

However, the realm of God is *prior to* the realm of Caesar, and more *fundamental*. Our religious identity is *primary*, and our civic identity *secondary*. We enter into the civic arena, and into politics, as people of faith, as individuals already formed in significant part by our relationship with God and with one another as the *children* of God. We are the coin of the *religious* realm, stamped with the image and bristling with the *imagination* of God. When we engage as *citizens*, we

ought not strip away our goodness, our Godness, as if it were some exoskeleton that we no longer need. It is fundamentally who we *are*, and we dare not seek to navigate the world without it.

Indeed, our faith *requires* us to engage in civic life. Perhaps not *all* of us, since the faith is constantly renewed by people who live the monastic life. But *most* of us are called to engage in civic life in order to move the world in the direction of the kingdom of heaven. Although we are admonished to not be *of* the world, which is to say caught up in its snares and delusions, we are called to be “in” the world. How else can we live out our baptismal promises, especially the part about *striv[ing]* for justice and peace among all people, and *respect[ing]* the dignity of every human being?

We are called to engage in *civic life*, and even in the messiness of *politics*. How else can we assure that on the last day we will be counted among those who have fed the hungry, watered the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, taken care of the sick, and visited the imprisoned. Certainly there is much that can be done by communities of faith *as* communities of faith, but there is far more that we can do as energized *citizens* and wielders of *public power*.

Let me be clear. I am not suggesting that the church as an institution should engage in electoral or party politics. Far from it. Nothing in Scripture suggests that this would be a good idea. My point is that the people of God should

engage with the *issues* of the *day*, which occasionally will *compel* us to light a fire under politicians and public officials in order to encourage them to pursue policies that are consistent with our baptismal vows.

Finally, my friends, our faith requires us to be *suspicious of* religious folk who enter the civic arena and amass public power. We should be wary of political actors who make a great show of their religious commitment, or who fervently insist that God is on their side. Recall the apocryphal statement attributed to Abraham Lincoln: “Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on *God’s* side.”

Many of us find it quite easy to cast a critical eye at bible thumpers who espouse political views that are antithetical to ours. That is a good thing. But we should not shy away from thumping that very same bible, and from casting a critical eye at *ourselves* as we enter the political fray. After all, one of the worst things we can do is to “use” our religion to further our own *personal* goals. We should “use” it, instead, to further *God’s* ends, bringing about the beloved community, and living into the kingdom of heaven. “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperors. And give to God the things that are God’s.” Which is to say our very selves. Amen.