

## **"On Loyalty"**

Matthew 22:15-22

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### The Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

I am continually amazed at the ways in which the Bible, the living word of the living God, continues to speak to us in ways timely and relevant. And today's text from Matthew's gospel is a perfect illustration of that.

The question posed to Jesus that day was a trick question. It was a trap, designed to get him into trouble. And understand that the ones asking, who were threatened by his rising popularity, didn't even see eye to eye with each other. The Herodians were devout followers of the emperor. Whoever was Caesar at the time, Tiberius, in this case, was considered to be divine—the son of God. The Herodians would have honored that. The Pharisees, however, were the religiously devout, lovers of the law, and they would have been having none of that.

So the question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor," is a setup. Answering yes gets Jesus in trouble with the Pharisees while answering no could get him arrested for advocating against the state. And isn't it interesting how two different sides of the same coin collude with one another against Jesus.

So Jesus' response to their question is brilliant, I think. "Show me the coin used for the tax." They produce a denarius. He asked, "Whose head is this on the coin and whose title?" They replied, "The emperor's." Then 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 it left them speechless.

The phrase, as it is usually quoted, "Render unto the Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," is one of the more familiar of Jesus' sayings. It is also, I am convinced, one of the most misunderstood of all his sayings. What has been taught and largely accepted, is that in making a case for the separation of church and state—two separate realms, God's and Caesar's, is that they are two separate but equal realms. As people of faith, we know however, that they are not equal in terms of authority, power or our allegiance. Our allegiance is always to God.

And furthermore, that because Jesus declared that God and the state are to be separate, that it somehow implies that people of faith are not to be political in any way. Jesus, however, was extremely political. Jesus was all about challenging the political, religious and social structures of his day. This is the reason his followers were harassed and threatened. Each Sunday, when we pray, "Thy kingdom come..." that is a political statement every bit as much as it is a religious longing.

There is a fine line, and it is so easy crossed, between people of faith engaging with and participating in the political process, motivated to do so by the teachings of their faith, and turning the government into their Lord. The challenge for those early Christians was that they were living under Roman rule. And as Rome became a superpower, it forced everyone under its authority to declare that Caesar was Lord. And this is where this text is as relevant for us today as it was for those early hearers. Because if we worship God as our Lord, we cannot worship anyone or anything else.

But this is where a problem arises. There is in this country a very powerful reality known as civil religion. It's the complicated but deeply held religious devotion we Americans have to our country,

complete with our own sacred symbols like the flag and the National Anthem. And it is enshrined in our own sacred texts like the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, and observed in our national holidays.

Fifty years ago, sociologist Robert Bellah, published a now famous essay entitled, *Civil Religion in America*. In that essay, Bellah makes the case that while some claim Christianity is our national faith, others argue that both church and synagogue celebrate only a generalized religion—a hallowed reverence of the American Way of Life. But few, he argues, have realized or acknowledged how deeply elaborate and embedded civil religion is in American life.

Bellah reminds us that there are four references to God in the Declaration of Independence. The first one speaks to the Laws of Nature and the Laws of God. These entitle people to live independently. The second reference is perhaps the most familiar, namely that we are all, “endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable Rights...” The third reference is an appeal to the “Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions;” and the last one indicates, “a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence.” Bellah argues that implied in the last two references, is a biblical God of history who stands in judgment over the world.

This civil religion, present from the nation’s founding, is neither explicitly Christian nor totally sectarian. The founders viewed a religious people as essential to the success of the democratic republic. After all, Democracy depended on a moral citizenry, and most people’s morals, in the eyes of the founders, rested on a theistic religion.

In fact, Bellah argues that, in the minds of Franklin, Jefferson, Washington and other founding fathers, expressions of civil religion were never meant to be a substitute for Christianity. But he concludes the essay by saying this.

[Civil religion] has often been used and is being used today as a cloak for petty interests and ugly passions. It is in need—as any living faith—of continual reformation, of being measured by universal standards. But it is not evident that it is incapable of growth and new insights.

All presidents and most politicians and elected officials invoke the name of God. Some do it better than others. Some are more genuine while others are self-serving. And there have always been encroachments and threats to the separation of church and state. Adding the phrase “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954, or printing “In God We Trust” on the money, are prime examples.

But today, we are witnessing the rise of rabid fundamentalists, adhering to an outdated biblical literalism, who seem to be emboldened. They are holding public office. They are seeking to impose their religious points of view onto the creation of public policies. Some go so far as to claim divine mandates for their governing policies and priorities. And this is a clear crossing of an ethical line.

It is important to distinguish between the moral witness of religious people, speaking out against something that offends their moral conscience, and the use of religion as a strategic means to advance the agendas and fortunes of a particular party or candidate. When religion becomes political it can be divisive, like it was during the struggle for civil rights. That’s to be expected as no rights have ever been granted without first being denied and demanded by those being discriminated against. What becomes problematic, however, is when those divisions fall exclusively along partisan, party lines and no longer have anything to do with one’s moral witness. If God does bless America, God does not bless us as Republicans or Democrats or Independents.

Alexis de Tocqueville was as astute an observer of our young American democracy as there ever was. And he seemed to understand the powerful role that religion can contribute to public life. But in a key chapter in his book *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville warns that religion must encourage virtue and must never become infected by partisan politics. He wrote,

If Americans, who change the head of government once in four years, who elect new legislators every two years, and renew the state officers every twelve months...had not placed religion beyond their reach [through their Constitution] where could it take hold in the ebb and flow of human opinions?

Whenever religious leaders enter into partisan, electoral politics, it will most likely be the case that religion gets defiled rather than that politics gets elevated.

And government—the work of governing, should be carried out by smart, informed people, regardless of their religious persuasion, who are committed to finding solutions to problems that will make life better for all. And our government can never be allowed to become a tool in the hands of a certain brand of religion, seeking to impose itself on the unconvinced and the unwilling.

That today's so-called evangelicals so easily turn a blind eye to the hijacking of the Christian faith, by power-hungry political opportunists seeking to overturn the values upon which this nation was built, such as free speech, a free and independent press, the right to question the authority of our elected leaders, and the right to equal protection and treatment under the law, reveals that they neither understand the faith they profess, the Christ to whose name their faith appeals, nor the country they claim to love so fervently. And let's never forget, it was the collusion between religion and the state that was responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.

Jesus was asked a trick question about whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. His response was, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God that things that are God's." So yes, give to the state that which belongs to the state, but nothing more. But give unto God what is God's, which is everything.

Our country certainly deserves the devotion of its citizens, but not blind devotion. Loving our country does not mean we cannot criticize it when it is wrong. To the contrary. We must love it in such a way that we name its shortcomings and then work for its improvement. And our patriotism must never sink into a sloppy form of undiscerning, flag-waving idol worship. You simply cannot claim to be a good American and to love your country if you don't also care about the wellbeing of your fellow citizens and neighbors. You cannot claim that you love America if your own ambitions and actions seek to weaken its institutions rather than strengthen them.

As people of faith, as followers of Jesus Christ our Lord, our loyalty is always first and foremost to God, never the country. And that's what Jesus was pointing out that day. I happen to believe it's what the Spirit is pointing out to us today as well.

Amen.