

Message for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A (10/18/2020)  
Matthew 22:5-22

What better way to raise the temperature of a conversation in mixed company than to bring up money, religion, and politics all at once? If your goal is to stir the pot, then you're bound to succeed. The Pharisees and Herodians, representatives of the religious and political elite, aren't afraid to do just that when they approach Jesus in the temple in our Gospel from Matthew today. First, they butter him up with false admiration: "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth...." Then, they set the trap: "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

The question is in bad faith; Jesus' opponents know that there's no good answer. On the one hand, if he advocates the payment of taxes, he appears to collaborate with Rome, and risks alienating his followers, Jewish commoners who suffer under Roman occupation. If, on the other hand, he opposes the payment of taxes, he appears to reject Roman authority, and risks the charge of sedition.<sup>1</sup> It's a no-win situation, an impossible challenge designed to undermine his legitimacy.

But true to form, Jesus bests his adversaries in the rhetorical sparring ring. His reply to their question about taxes works on multiple levels. First of all, he evades the trap by giving Rome its due. Holding up a denarius, he asks: "Whose head is [on this coin], and whose title?" Of course, it's the emperor's. "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's...." And there you have it; no political subversion. The Roman revenue machine can continue to grind the poor under its wheels.

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<sup>1</sup> See Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 439.

But, Jesus' reply also calls Rome's authority into question: "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." That second phrase qualifies the first. Although Rome may demand a share of the people's coins on account of its political power, a tax doesn't necessarily establish the empire's supremacy. If, to quote the psalmist, "the earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it,"<sup>2</sup> then there is no currency, no community, no political configuration that falls outside of God's purview. In other words, everything belongs to God, so God's sovereignty trumps even that of Rome. And there you have it; no collaboration with the oppressor.

Jesus' brilliant response to his opponents' treachery gets him off the hook on both counts. But more importantly, his teaching about the emperor and God throws the question of allegiance back onto his listeners. "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's," that is, *Tell me what you think; what belongs to whom?* In other words, *How will you live simultaneously as citizens of an earthly kingdom and citizens of the kingdom of God,*<sup>3</sup> *especially when one is in tension with the other?*

By refusing to give a simple answer to the question about paying taxes, Jesus complicates the relationship between discipleship and political engagement. We might prefer to hear Jesus instruct us simply to fulfill two parallel responsibilities,<sup>4</sup> or check two separate boxes<sup>5</sup>: *Pay your taxes, but also give generously to your church and other organizations working for justice and mercy.* The value in that reading is that it

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 24:1.

<sup>3</sup> [members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources/2020-10-18/2128#resources](https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources/2020-10-18/2128#resources).

<sup>4</sup> Richard E. Spalding, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 190.

<sup>5</sup> Raj Nadella, [www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4624](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4624).

dignifies paying taxes as a God-given privilege and duty. But, **citizenship as vocation involves much more than the question of taxes and tithes; it's a broader challenge that requires ongoing vigilance, prayerful discernment, and active participation in political life.**

The Lutheran tradition has always acknowledged both the legitimacy of secular authority and the responsibility of Christian people to engage with it. Luther lays out this argument in his 1523 treatise “Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should Be Obeyed.” God has ordained two governments, Luther contends, the government of Christ, who exercises his influence in and through the gospel, and the government of the prince. “Both [governments] must be permitted to remain,” he writes, “the one to produce righteousness, the other to bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds.”<sup>6</sup> What’s more, according to Luther, “the Christian... serves, helps, and does all [one] can to assist the governing authority,” not out of unquestioning obedience, but “for the sake of others, that they may be protected and that the wicked may not become worse.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, **we engage earnestly with secular authority on one another’s behalf. To “give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s” means to respect and partake in the political process in service to the neighbor.**

Of course, deference to the governing authority can’t come at the expense of our allegiance to God. **“Giving to God the things that are God’s” means seeking first the reign of God and all that it implies for human community. Citizenship as vocation, therefore, requires that we press people in power to uphold the common good – that which promotes abundant life for all – and defy them when**

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<sup>6</sup> *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 45, 92.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 94.

**they don't.** "What if a prince is in the wrong?" Luther asks. "Are his people bound to follow him then too? Answer: No, for it is no one's duty to do wrong; we must obey God (who desires the right) rather than [human beings] [Acts 5:29]."<sup>8</sup>

What a responsibility! Engaging faithfully in public life is easier said than done, friends. To borrow the words of one interpreter: "All of us have a fine line to walk in negotiating [our multiple allegiances]. Most of us are collaborators some of the time, subversives some of the time. There is comfort, perhaps, in Jesus' refusal to make the conundrum of daily rendering [either to the emperor or to God] into an easy question."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, **we're called to weigh our various commitments with an eye to Christ, whose influence touches every area of life. His grace and truth are the currency in which we trade, looking always to the interests of our neighbors.** So, God grant you holy wisdom in the fulfillment of your duties, civic and otherwise, until God's reign finally comes in its fullness on Earth as in heaven.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid 125. See also Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession, *The Book of Concord*, 50.

<sup>9</sup> Spalding 192.