

Pentecost 20A (10/22/2017)
 Isaiah 45:1-7
 Psalm 96:1-9 (10-13)
 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

We treat religion as a private matter, as though faith shouldn't impact how we vote, or what we expect from government, or what we do with our money. But the entirety of life falls within God's purview. Since we bear God's image, God claims our whole lives, even when someone else claims our coins. And, the conviction that all people bear the divine image compels us to honor all people with corresponding dignity.

“Do you preach politics from the pulpit?” As soon as I hear the question, I know the person asking it has an opinion about the right answer. It sounds straightforward, but a simple yes or no would not suffice. The underlying assumption is that politics and religion don't belong together – that preachers who bring matters of public life into worship violate the supposed sanctity of spiritual life. But politics, like faith, reflect our deepest commitments. So politics, like faith, shape the ways that we relate to one another and to the world. **How on Earth could our politics and our faith *not* intersect?**

Nevertheless, we often restrict religion to the private realm. It's a matter of the heart, we tell ourselves – I believe what I believe, and you believe what you believe. So, faith shouldn't necessarily impact how we vote, or what we expect from government, or what we do with our money.¹ **The temptation, in other words, is to compartmentalize our lives, assuming that faith stands apart from other allegedly unrelated priorities.**

¹ See Lance Pape, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2201.

Upon first inspection, our Gospel from Matthew today might appear to support such a position. Jesus might seem to advocate a separation between political and religious life: “Give... to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” In other words, *Go ahead and pay your taxes, but also make the appropriate offering to God. Your duty as citizens is distinct from your duty as people of faith. Politics and religion don’t belong together.*

But, before we congratulate ourselves for discovering a biblical foundation for the separation of church and state, we ought to take a closer look at the story. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Jesus’ opponents ask. Keep in mind that the question is not sincere – it’s designed to “entrap him in what he [says].” On the one hand, if Jesus advocates the payment of taxes, he appears to collaborate with Rome, and risks alienating the Jewish masses 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.² It’s a lose-lose situation. But true to form, Jesus sees through his interrogators’ treachery, and responds to their question with a memorable, if puzzling, pronouncement.

“Show me the coin used for the tax,” he begins, focusing his teaching on a visual aid. “Whose head is this, and whose title?” The answer is obvious: “The emperor’s.” The Roman denarius was engraved with the likeness of the emperor and inscribed with the phrase: “Tiberius Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus.”³

Through the use of its currency, Rome made it abundantly clear whose image and

² See Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 439.

³ Robert Kysar,

http://members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=10&d8d=19&d8y=2014&event_id=67&cycle=A&atom_id=25247. For alternative translation, see Spalding, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 190.

influence should circulate throughout the empire. “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s,” Jesus says, “and to God the things that are God’s.”

He certainly cannot be accused of sedition – Jesus concedes that coins, which bear the emperor’s image, belong to the emperor. However, the second half of his teaching reveals that this is no simple command to obey earthly authorities. “Give... to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, *and [give back] to God the things that are God’s.*” Stated a different way, ***if that which is made in the emperor’s image belongs to the emperor, then that which is made in the image of God belongs to God.*** We hear an unmistakable echo of the Jewish affirmation that God makes *humankind* in God’s image, according to God’s likeness.⁴ **Roman coins bear the mark of Roman power, but each and every person bears the mark of God the Creator, the source and sustainer of all life.**⁵

In this way, Jesus deftly avoids the trap set by those who would see him arrested, but he also makes a profound statement about human identity and allegiance. He acknowledges the multiple dimensions of life, and grants that each lays a claim to a share of our loyalty. The public sphere demands our attention, yes, as do family, work, and culture. So be it. But, Jesus also insists that the entirety of life falls within God’s purview. **Since we bear God’s image, God claims our whole lives, even when someone else claims our coins. And, unlike the emperor’s tax, God’s claim does not burden, but rather redeems us. Divine love and**

⁴ Genesis 1:26-27.

⁵ See Richard E. Spalding, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 190; Susan Grove Eastman, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 193; W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew: A Shorter Commentary*, 375.

faithfulness, and *not* earthly currency, establish our value, and thus demand our final allegiance.

So, faith can never be disentangled from politics, family life, work, or culture. God's claim on our lives embraces and exceeds all the others.⁶ **Every priority, every decision, every struggle is set in the context of God's inscription on our lives, the cross of Christ to which we are joined and with which we are marked at baptism. And what's more, the conviction that *all* people bear the divine image compels us to honor all people with corresponding dignity.**

Dear church, the emperor demands a share of our coins, but God demands our faithfulness in the face of uncertainty, our courage in the face of injustice, our generosity in the face of need – in short, our whole lives. **Immersed in the free gift of grace, let's return to God what has always been God's – our selves, our time, and our possessions, signs of God's enduring love – for the sake of the abundant life God envisions for the whole world, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who offered himself for us.**

⁶ See John Paul Heil, http://members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=10&d8d=19&d8y=2014&event_id=67&cycle=A&atom_id=25245.