

Render Unto Caesar

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May the one who speaks and those who listen together discern what in these words is the word of God for us in this hour.

Over the last few weeks, I have been thinking a lot about an old song I used sing in my evangelical church camps and youth conferences. Although I am no Marcus Hummon or Michael Kelsh, I hope you will permit me to sing a bit of it.

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord;
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord;
And we pray that our unity will be one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians by our love,
And they'll know we are Christians by our love.

Sadly, this song has been on my mind not because of its simple beauty but because it seems so utterly out of keeping with life as we live it especially during election season. We Christians are downright nasty to each other in this time. Our life together is marked by discord not oneness in the Spirit. We savage each other in the streets, in the media, at our kitchen tables, and unfortunately even in our churches. The impoverished quality of our life together has led me to wonder Just what are my obligations in and to political life? What role should party identity play in Christian life? Just how should I think of being a Christian and being a Democrat or a Republican?

Might we get some assistance in thinking through these questions from our Gospel reading for the day: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." That saying is better known to us in the King James Version, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's."

So, just what do we owe to Caesar, or in contemporary terms, to government and by extension to political life? What are my obligations to God and what are my obligations to the state? What is the relationship between those two sets of obligations? Those questions are daunting. To make a serious attempt to think through those questions, we would have to turn to St. Paul, Augustine, Luther and Calvin among others. And that would be a bit much for a sermon. So, I propose we try to get at these larger issues by way of a smaller and less abstract question: "How should my political commitments and affiliations bear on my life in church? Does being a Christian compel me to be a Democrat or a Republican or perhaps a Libertarian? And no matter, how I answer that question, what does that mean for how we live with those in our congregation who disagree? Should our congregations sort themselves out politically so that they are homogenous?"

I am guessing that posing this question is generating knots in many of our stomachs. Many of us simply do not want political conversations taking place in church because we believe in a clear separation between church and state. Indeed, for some of us, today's Gospel offers the rationale for that very separation. If we would but give to

the emperor what is his and give to God what is God's, then we could simply keep these issues from tearing up congregational life. In church, we can worry about what belongs to God and leave Caesar—that is to say politics—outside the door.

I wish the answer could be so simple. We know that the question of politics is finally a matter of what makes for a just community, and there is nothing that is more central to Jewish, Muslim and Christian traditions than our shared belief in a God who calls us to lives of justice. Christians may well believe in the separation of church and state but not “religion” and “politics.” It would be hard to get through more than a page or two of the Bible without running into conversations about how we ought to treat the poor, the widow, the orphan, the prisoner, and the stranger in our midst.

If Christians cannot take a pass on political questions, then how can we see to it that our time in church is not marked by the same bitter contentiousness that marks the rest of our lives? That is the question that we must struggle to answer this morning and on every occasion in our common life.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus is confronted by opponents who have set for him a clever trap. His opponents are Pharisees and Herodians. They approach Jesus and ask him a question, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

The question is crafty because either answer is sure to embroil Jesus in controversy and one answer will end his life. Suppose that Jesus responds by saying “No, It is unlawful to pay taxes.” In essence, Jesus would be calling for revolution against Imperial Rome which has occupied and colonized Judea. Taxes are demanded by the Emperor, in this case Tiberius Caesar, not only to subsidize life for the ruling classes in Rome but also as tribute. By paying taxes, subjugated Jews acknowledge the Lordship of Caesar and the authority of Rome. If Jesus refuses to pay taxes and tells others to do likewise, Jesus would thereby explicitly challenge Rome's authority and legitimacy. With that answer in hand, his opponents can head to Pilate and charge Jesus with sedition and thereby bring about his execution.

On the other hand, let us suppose that Jesus declares that it is right and proper to pay taxes to Caesar. Were he to do so, he would immediately break communion with the masses who adore him, the masses who despise Roman occupation. The adoring crowds who follow Jesus are filled with Messianic expectation. They see in Jesus someone who is filled with power and authority, someone whose sense of intimacy with God gives him a presence and dignity that is undaunted and unburdened by the crushing weight of Rome. The lowly and broken are drawn to him because when they are in his presence they no longer feel worthless and beaten down by a conquering power. When they are with this man, they feel the very presence of God and so once more feel free, worthwhile and loved. When they are with Jesus, they no longer feel desperate and defeated. They can breathe and live and again because in Him, they find Life.

If Jesus were to say to his inquisitors, “Yes, it is right and appropriate to pay taxes to the Emperor,” he would be affirming the legitimacy of Roman rule. He would no longer be on side of those who are poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are meek, those who mourn the bitter oppression of Empire. Rather he would be on the side of the oppressors and the powerful. He would be just

another accommodationist religious leader who gets by colluding and making nice with imperial authority.

And so, Jesus, with great skill and sheer brilliance, refuses either answer:

‘Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

That coin is likely to have had on it the following proclamation: “TIBERIUS CAESAR, SON OF THE DIVINE AUGUSTUS, AUGUSTUS.”¹ In essence, the coin proclaims Tiberius to be Emperor and the Son of the Divine Augustus, a Son of God.

So, what are we to make of Jesus’s response? Is he calling for a separation of church and state? Is he telling us that each sphere of life, the political and the religious, has its legitimate claim and that we must honor them both? I think not. After all, the distinction between the political and the religious and even the words themselves are ours and not his. Neither Jesus nor the Israelite tradition before him made any neat distinction between political life and religious life.

If Jesus really did believe that Rome was within its rights to demand tribute and taxes, then surely, a simple yes would do. Likewise, if he thought it appropriate for his occupied people to resist Rome by violent revolution, then a simple no would suffice. Indeed, some Jews in Jesus’s time did call for tax revolts that led in turn to bloody and brutal violence.

Jesus rejects both of these alternatives. He refuses to accept the legitimacy of Roman rule, but Jesus also refuses to call for violent revolution or non-payment of taxes. His response seems to amount to the following: Pay your taxes. It is not possible to overcome Rome by explicit revolt. But remember, you do not belong to Rome even if Rome would have you believe otherwise. And Augustus is not Pontifex Maximus, The Great High Priest, regardless of what his coins may say. You do not belong to Rome. You belong to God and God alone.

When Jesus says, “Give to God what is God’s,” he expects his listeners to remember the beginning of the 24th Psalm: “**The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers**” (Psalm 24:1-2). Jesus wants us to remember that no finite earthly power has any ultimate claim or purchase on us. So, by all means, let us give back to the Emperor his idolatrous coinage. Give him what he extorts, but the Emperor and his cronies who profit by aligning themselves with Roman occupation would do well to remember that he exceeds his authority when he pretends that he is God and Lord. As a matter of survival, we may have to pay taxes to the Emperor even when those taxes are used in a fashion that we find reprehensible. But that we pay Caesar’s taxes need not mean that we pay him tribute.

Ultimately, by going to the cross, Jesus even opens up the possibility of resistance and non-cooperation by means of nonviolent resistance. And that is how Gandhi read

¹ See *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version. A New Annotated Edition* by the Society for Biblical Literature (HarperCollins, 1993), 1898.

these verses. Here are Gandhi's words: "Jesus evaded the direct question put to him because it was a trap. He was in no way bound to answer it. He therefore asked to see the coin for taxes. And then said with withering scorn, "How can you who traffic in Caesar's coins and thus receive what to you are benefits of Caesar's rule refuse to pay taxes?" Jesus's whole preaching and practice point unmistakably to noncooperation, which necessarily includes nonpayment of taxes." Of course, it is just such nonpayment that Gandhi called for in resisting the British Empire.

Regardless of whether we accept Gandhi's reading, we can say with confidence that Christians are a people who know in their bones that they belong wholly to God and should the state or any other power call us to violate that belonging, then resist we must, even if it should mean imprisonment or even death on the cross.

But before we read Jesus' saying as an invitation to martyrdom, perhaps we can begin on a smaller scale. Jesus is teaching his disciples that our ultimate loyalty is due to God alone and not to the nation, nor to a political party, nor to our denomination nor even our religion. To be a Christian is to refuse to pay tribute to any principality, power, party or ideology.

If Jesus would have us resist identifying ourselves too closely and completely with any set of human institutions, powers or ideologies, why is that we so often willingly surrender ourselves and so become captive to just these powers and principalities? Why does it seem to matter so much to us that we are Democrats or Republicans? Why is it that an attack on our party seems to be an attack on our very selves? I think the Christian contemplative and writer, Richard Rohr, speaks to just this question:

It is much easier to belong to a group than it is to know that you belong to God. Those who firm up their own edges and identity too quickly without finding their center in God and in themselves will normally be the enemies of ecumenism, forgiveness, vulnerability, and basic human dialogue. Their identity is too insecure to allow any movement in or out. Their "Christ" tends to be very small, tribal, and "just like them."²

I fear that we have let the church and even Christian faith itself be co-opted and conquered by tribalism. We have invested too much of ourselves in our political identities. A good many of us—and I include myself here—sometimes go so far as to believe that we have discharged our obligation to God and to God's people by voting Democratic or voting Republican. The end result is that our political life is pervaded by the not so subtle stench of sanctimony. By baptizing our political convictions in holy water, we have made them sacred and unquestionable. The noxious discourse between our political parties is bad enough. What is still worse is when Christians get involved and call God's blessings down on friends and invoke God's wrath on their opponents. We come perilously close to and even fall into idolatry. We make Caesar stand in for God or in more contemporary terms: We insist that merely relative goods are absolute goods and so make God into a Democrat or a Republican.

What is most tragic about our idolatrous group loyalties is that they make it impossible for the Church to be the **universal** community of love which God has called us to be. To belong only to communities of the like-minded may be convenient and

² Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 23.

calming, but it just is not the life to which we are called by Christ. It is no great feat to be in communion with only those who mirror us. As Jesus put it, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect” (Mt 5: 46-48).

And just what does being perfect mean for Jesus? It means that we must love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. It means that we must be children of our Father in heaven who “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Being a part of the church which is the body of Christ is unlike other forms of belonging. Richard Rohr says it best, “I believe that we have no real access to *who we really are* except in God. Only when we rest in God can we find the safety, the spaciousness, and the scary freedom to be who we are, *all* that we are, *more* than we are, and *less* than we are.... All other systems exclude, expel, punish, and protect to find identity in ideological perfection or some kind of ‘purity.’ The contaminating element always has to be searched out and scolded. Apart from taking so much useless time and energy, this effort keeps you from the one and only task of love and union.”³ To be part of the church is to part of a community that gives itself to be broken for the world. Christ bids us to come and die; he does not bid us to join the Democratic Party.

The calling of Christian life is encompassed in the Eucharistic feast. We come together here because we believe that the broken body of the Christ has made us whole. When we come to the table, with our bodies we say that we stand prepared to be broken if that is what it takes to bring healing and life to those with whom we commune and for the entire world that belongs not to Caesar but to God. We come here because we seek to be like the Father who makes his sun rise on the evil and the good. By becoming one with the Christ in the power of the Spirit, we seek to present to the world a vision of radical love that goes beyond our political affiliations, beyond our class divisions, beyond race, gender and sexual orientation. We seek to love without limits. We seek to render unto God that which is God’s and that is nothing less than our very selves.

Such surrender and such communion do not mean that we will be freed from disagreement and conflict. In the short run—that is to say this side of the kingdom of God—we will have to be political actors and make our best judgments about which party or candidate best approximates our deepest aspirations. But can we engage in such difficult conversation with the humble knowledge that each of us remains a forgiven sinner rather than out of a smug sense of our rightness and superiority? What might it mean for us to be in conflict with each other with passionate intensity all the while convinced that our opponents are loved just as well by a God to whom we all belong? Those are the questions that we must answer together if we are to be the beloved community.

(Sung): And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.

³ Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 25.