

“God and Caesar”
Matthew 22:15-22

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I had a very interesting dream the other night, a dream that didn't even come close to any other dream I have ever had before and for some reason, unlike many of the dreams that I do not remember, I remember this one.

What I remember is accepting the invitation to share the gospel in a neighboring church. After the sermon, which was fairly even keel and normal, and not particularly dynamic when one might consider the level of charisma or lack thereof, I knelt on one knee in the chancel in order to lead the congregation in the prayers of the people.

I remember beginning the prayer and becoming so absorbed in the prayer that I lost all sense of self-awareness and sense of time. As I finished the prayer I opened my eyes and saw to my surprise and a little dismay that I had prayed for such a length of time that the majority of the congregation had actually gotten up from their respective places in the pews and left! Almost everyone had gone home and I didn't even know it! As I scan the pews this morning, I am glad you are here and hope that nobody goes home early for I have something important that I want to say that is predicated and driven by the today's gospel lesson from Matthew.

I begin by reminding us that several weeks ago, we heard a gospel story that Jesus used to imply that the religious authorities, especially those in Jerusalem, had mishandled their pastoral responsibilities in taking care of their respective flocks. The stories that Jesus used to communicate his charges of malpractice upset them. Severely! Now they are back with a plan to circumvent the popularity of Jesus and ultimately bring him to his knees. Jesus is challenged with three provocative questions that address the issues of taxation, the resurrection and what might constitute the greatest commandment.

The religious figures in Jerusalem wanted Jesus to go away, and if he did not go away they were going to take matters into their own hands to ensure that Jesus would disappear. Permanently! Jesus knew what was going on and regarded these religious conspirators to be crafty and shallow hypocrites, who acted with malice in their hearts and knew how to put on a good show for the people they had been called to serve. Sad commentary for people who were supposed to be religious, don't you think?

In the face of all this Jesus said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.” Apart from the sub-plot by some of the Pharisees and their cohorts to publicly compromise and embarrass Jesus, what Jesus said regarding Caesar and God offers food for thought in terms of how we practice our Christian faith and live as citizens within the framework of politics and government.

Jesus seems to imply that there is a place for the Caesar and for government as long as people are treated with dignity and respect, mercy and justice. Without civil order there is anarchy.

The Apostle Paul would later write to the church in Rome, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which

God has established.” Paul advocated the payment of taxes and the support of government officials, and regarded the people who practice a political vocation and profession as God’s servants.

Peter, too, understood the necessity of political authority. Peter argued that Christians should submit for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men, whether to the kings or to the governors. As a free people in Jesus Christ, according to Peter, we are called to show respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

And Jesus said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” There is a place for government when it governs justly, and a place for God as we live out our faith in a real world with real opportunities, challenges, and problems.

Following the lead of a John Neuhaus, a prominent Christian of the 20th century, who argued that there is place for religious dialogue and expressions of faith in the public square, I wish to raise the following question:

With a new presidential race for the White House underway for 2012 and political leaders proclaiming that all is well in South Carolina, how might we as Christians look and evaluate the politic of our present situation?

Allow me a moment to share one Christian’s perspective.

There is merit, I believe, in how one described the difference between a politician and a statesman. A politician is a person who will tell us what we want to hear, a person who resists making the hard, difficult decisions that need to be made in the best interest of the people. A statesman, or stateswoman, however, embraces difficult issues with grace and humility, with no small measure of courage, and makes the hard decisions with a vision for the future knowing that such decisions may jeopardize their political future.

Regarding the political races, we so desperately need candidates who have developed thoughtful positions regarding issues and have the ability to articulate them and stand by them with the conviction and passion of one’s mind and heart.

Thankful for businesses that have come to South Carolina and offered new jobs in a state with high unemployment, we can appreciate public statements out of Hilton Head Island and Bluffton that suggest there is progress with new business in our state, but we should also be aware of several counties and respective communities not far from here where people suffer from massive unemployment, extreme poverty, too many teenage pregnancies, and a general lack of hope. These same kind of troubles exist in pockets in our community.

I challenge the thought that all is well as a greater number of people enter these church doors every week to ask for help and assistance with food and medicine, rent and electricity, threatened with eviction or the loss of a home while they desperately wait for social security or a disability check, many who have worked hard but lost their jobs because of the adverse economy and downsizing.

C. S. Lewis once said that people have always known the difference between right and wrong. The problem is we are not always inclined to do what is right.

Reinhold Neibuhr declared, “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”

This sermon is about a responsible evangelical and Reformed theology as it relates to the gospel and real life. To be and remain faithful witnesses to the gospel, may we find ourselves in the position of reading Scripture, saying our prayers, sharing our

gifts, constantly seeking the way that is right, and finding the way clear to be engaged in the public square.

May we be mindful and aware of political and economical realities. May our faith in Jesus Christ lead us not only in knowing the difference between right and wrong, but inspire us as well to do the right thing as we say “No!” to growing desperation and hopelessness.

May we, in the name of Jesus Christ, be responsible citizens of government as we listen carefully to political candidates, as we expect them to cast a vision for tomorrow and lead us in ways of true justice as we register to vote and prepare to exercise the right to cast our vote.

May we, in the name of Jesus Christ, avoid the entrapment of political apathy that paralyzes government and its people.

And may Jesus be proud of who we are and what we do. Amen.