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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 22: 15-22

“Occupy What?”

I’ve been teaching the confirmation class for the past couple of weeks. We have 3 youth who will be confirmed in May. It’s been fun teaching them and learning together.

These first 4 weeks they’re learning what it means to be a Presbyterian. We started week one learning about John Calvin’s ideas about God, particularly God’s sovereignty. Now, in case you’re thinking that’s one heckuva way to begin a confirmation class talking about God’s sovereignty, don’t worry-these kids are smart. They can handle it.

The sovereignty of God is a central theme of the Reformation. The sovereignty of God, by the way, is a fancy way of saying that God is in charge of everything. To say God is sovereign is a way of saying that God gives life to all that lives, existence to all that exists, and breath to all that breathes. To say God is sovereign also says that God creates everything and loves everything. That’s what it means to say God is sovereign.

We also talked about how theologians since Calvin have adapted and “reformed” Calvin’s idea of the sovereignty of God. We talked about Karl Barth, who was a theologian of the early to mid 20th century who lived in Germany. Barth saw the church increasingly acting like Hitler was in charge of everything, so he wrote about how the church and society needed to reform its ways. We talked about Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement, and how that movement was birthed from the black church because people saw that, yet again, the church and society needed to reform its ways. We talked about the belief that because God is sovereign, God continues to care for us and the world and provide for people in today’s changing world, and because of this we sometimes need to adapt how we participate in the world. So we talked about things they would reform.

Now notice in every example I just gave you, the people didn’t set out to only reform the church, they also set out to reform society. They didn’t separate the two because to do so is impossible. The church is a part of society, so a change in the church will affect the society, just like a change in society will affect the church. A person cannot hop back and forth between these two worlds as if they never touch because God is sovereign. God is in charge of *everything*. We can’t separate out one piece of our life from another, because God oversees it all. Just like John Calvin said, God is sovereign.

This is why being a Presbyterian means our faith is personal but never private. We don’t live in a bubble isolated from society. We are a part of society. We can’t separate out our Sunday morning self from our Monday through Saturday self. What we believe about God may be personal, but how we live as God’s children is anything but private.

Taking this a step further, we are called to engage the world, and help make the world a better place because God loves the world and cares about what happens to it and in it.

Which gets me to rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's and rendering unto God what is God's. This is a pretty well known Bible verse. People often recite it as though it's very clear-cut that we give our allegiance to the secular world when it is called for, and we give our allegiance to God when it is called for. But such a black and white understanding of the passage dismisses God's sovereignty—remember, God is in charge of everything and we can't separate our worlds. A black and white understanding also ignores the deeper question of the passage, which **is** what is our relationship to the world? And how **are we** to live in this world?

The issue here in the 21st century isn't so much about paying taxes as much as it about paying attention to what our government is **doing** with our taxes and whether as Christians we support its actions or call on it to change its ways? For example, should we as Christians remain silent in the face of wars? Should we protest the use of torture or the death penalty? What should a follower of Christ do when the legislature takes action opposing or supporting same-sex marriage? Should tax payer money support family planning programs or organizations?

These and a whole host of other issues speak to the places where this passage challenges us today, and there are devout Christians on both sides of those issues. What do we expect from a government that is supported with our tax dollars? Jesus said render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and we do that with our tax dollars, but God is in charge of everything, including Caesar, so what do we do when these allegiances are in conflict?

The distinguished Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that "religion begins in mysticism but ends in politics." It makes us a little uncomfortable, but that is precisely what happened when Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and now two days later is telling the Pharisees and Herodians to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and render unto God what is God's. Between Palm Sunday and Good Friday, and in our reading from today it is Tuesday of that week, Jesus The gentle teacher and healer from the countryside becomes a political activist and on that day forward stamps Christian faith with a distinctly political hue.

Which is a topic no less controversial today than it was 2,000 years ago. We are understandably nervous when religion becomes political. We hear the vitriol of Christians who are political. Furthermore, we live in a nation, a political system, that has thrived, and in which religion has thrived, by the careful judicial separating of state and church—none of which changes the reality that Jesus himself, in the name of God, came to Jerusalem, inserted himself into a distinctly political climate, and got into all sorts of trouble with the religious and political leaders.

Someone once told me that in politics there no permanent friends, only permanent interests. In today's story we see a prime example of that. The Pharisees and Herodians are not friends, but they do share the mutual interest to see Jesus removed from the scene.

The Pharisees hope Jesus will support paying taxes to Caesar so the Jewish people would see him as a sympathizer of Rome, and the Herodians hope he will oppose paying taxes so they can accuse him of treason. They both want to trap him.

But in this situation, as he does in so many situations like this, Jesus gives a confusing and compelling answer. Yes, you have a duty to your government and country under whose flags and laws you live, he tells them. But you also have an allegiance to God and God's laws in whose kingdom you live. And it is a challenge to decide, what do you owe and to whom?

As I was researching and writing my sermon, I received an e-mail with the subject line "Jesus on Wall Street". Someone once called these sorts of things faxes from God. The timing couldn't have been better considering today's sermon topic. Apparently, a group of Harvard divinity school students, most of whom are Episcopalian, went to Wall Street wearing their albs (those white robes that acolytes wear) and carrying handmade cardboard crosses. They went to support and to provide pastoral care to the Occupy Wall Street protestors. They also carried handmade cardboard signs proclaiming "Blessed are the poor" and "Blessed are the peacemakers."

According to the e-mail, the protest chaplains went to Wall Street because they figured that's where the church should be, right there in the middle of it all, trying to figure out what do we owe and to whom?

While we're on the subject of Wall Street, there's a picture making the rounds of the internet that you might have seen. It's a snapshot of the Wall Street protestors with a caption that reads:

Join us as we organize against corporations, using social networking (by corporations), smartphones (by corporations) serviced by wireless carriers (that are corporations), wearing clothes (made by corporations), capturing it all on cameras (made by corporations), and getting there via cars, buses, bicycles and shoes (made by corporations). We deserve more than greedy corporations. Join us afterwards at Starbucks!

The photo is supposed to be funny and ironic and point out the flaws in the protestors' mission. But personally, I think the photo points out just how challenging it is to live in this world. Some people argue that if you buy something from a certain company, you must support that company. After all, money talks. End of conversation.

But as one person wrote:

I can appreciate the directness of this approach. I wish life were as simple as that. But, it's not.

If it were, I couldn't ever complain to a company after I bought their product...but I do. If it were, I couldn't lobby my representatives after I voted them into office....but I do.

If it were, I couldn't both go to church, financially support its ministry, and at the same time work for change within the church...but I do.

And that, my friends, is the lovely, beautiful, challenging, tension of our times. It's the gray. That's how I can proudly pay taxes, and advocate the government spend them differently. Long live the tension, those who shed light on it, and all who struggle with the questions of our day. ("A Wee Blether" blog; <http://www.adamjcopeland.com/>)

I wish I could tell you that as Christians we don't have to live with tension and that life is black and white. I wish I could tell you that it is clear-cut that we give our allegiance to the secular world when it is called for, and we give our allegiance to God when it is called for. But unfortunately, Jesus answered the question in such a way that we are put in the position of having to balance our responsibilities as citizens of both this country and God's kingdom.

Roman Catholic priest, Father George Zabelka, was an Army chaplain in 1945 in the Pacific, when he blessed the pilot, crew, and plane that flew off to drop the second atomic bomb on Japan. Father Zabelka blessed and served the Eucharist to the Catholic crew of the plane. The plane flew to Nagasaki, which was the largest and first Catholic city in Japan. Their aiming point to drop the bomb was the steeple of the Roman Catholic cathedral and school in the city. The bomb destroyed three orders of Catholic nuns, and wiped out the Catholic cathedral and school and all of the children.

In 1980, looking back Father Zabelka said, "One would have thought that I, as a Catholic priest, would have spoken out against the atomic bombing of nuns. One would have thought that I would have suggested that as a minimal standard of Catholic morality, Catholics shouldn't bomb Catholic children. I didn't. . . . I was told it was necessary." (from an interview in *Sojourners*, Sept. 1980, pp. 12-15.)

Was it necessary?

Rendering unto Caesar what is his and rendering unto God what is God's is not an easy issue, and we are not excused from engaging it. As someone once said, "Christian faith is a moral compass, and it takes moral courage to consult it and not ignore it."

Amen.