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Sermon for Sunday, October 16, 2011

Sermon Texts: Ruth 1: 1-19a
Psalm 95 & 96
Matthew 22: 15-21
I Thessalonians 1: 1-10

Sermon Title: "Is Caesar Really God?"
Sermon Topic: Faith vs. Patriotism - The Battle at the Polls
Sermon Purpose: To help people understand that in these tense days of political strife, we can still be rendering to Caesar and rendering to God, as faithful Christians.

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Sermon Prayer: God of all generations, there are times when we come to this moment in our worship with questions about where and how we are being led in our service to Christ. As we study Your written and living Word, we ask that Your guidance and power be made manifest, and that we can plainly see the reasons and the results of the ministry to which we have been called.

Now, may the words of my lips and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight. In Jesus' precious name, we pray, Amen.

Some scripture passages easily become one-liners (used, more often than not, out of context) and the phrase in today's lesson about rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's is right up there with the best of them.

In recent years, these words of Jesus - "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" - have been hurled at anyone who would dare to bring social and political concerns into the arena of religion and morality.

On the other hand, some governments have been quick to use these same words to demand (in the name of God) an allegiance to their ways of doing things. The entire context of the gospel would show us that either approach to today's lesson misses His point. How do we avoid either making Caesar into a kind of god or making God into some non-relevant religious order?

For starters, we need to see the story records an attempt at entrapment gone awry. The hope was that Jesus would bury Himself by whichever answer He gave. If He had said it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, He would antagonize the religious leaders and the Jewish people who were fed up with paying taxes to an occupying government. If He claimed that these taxes should not be paid, He would immediately be reported as a rebel and killed. (It was a situation in which a person is "damned if you do, and damned if you don't.") In other words, we see that these people weren't really interested in any answer - so Jesus didn't really give them one. More than anything else, He was telling them to "Get lost! Go chase yourself!"

So, does that mean, that we ignore the whole event and decide that it has nothing to say to us? No! Quite the contrary!

No Gospel event is to be ignored. Each event was written so we might better understand how we are to live Jesus' message in our era. This little tangle (which ended so badly for those who set it up) gives us pause to examine our relationship with Caesar in the light of our faith, and to reflect on our



relationship to the scripture as people who claim allegiance to these United States. How can we be good believers and good Americans, at the same time?

The context of our lives may not be as clear-cut as it was for the people of temple days. They lived as a religious people under a government that made no bones about rejecting the Jewish religion. **Everyone** knew the court of God and the court of Caesar were separate. To put it into today's perspective, let's say the situation was similar to any country where religious practices must be underground or at least at the open displeasure of the established government. Ours is a very different situation. The lines are not drawn so clearly. We claim to be a religious-oriented government. We speak about God on our currency, in our Congress, and even in our pledge of allegiance to our nation's flag. We hire chaplains for our military personnel. We even have clergy give invocations at inaugurations and at other national events. At the same time, we proclaim separation of church and state. We insist that religious leaders stay out of Pentagon business.

The bottom line is that we try to have it both ways. And what happens? Confusion reigns! We come away not being certain whether Caesar is God or whether we can serve two masters despite what it says in the Gospel.

When we look at the life of Jesus it becomes quite clear that He didn't cater to the concept of separating the two worlds. The way He put it was that either we would grow to love the one and hate the other, or we would worship the one and despise the other. We are being confronted with a choice. WHO IS OUR GOD? To whom do we really pay our taxes?

Decisions that are made, policies that are followed, and priorities that are proclaimed will always be done in the name of good versus evil, whatever its name might be. This was true clear back to the time of the Crusades, regardless of which side of the shield the combatants stood. It's true, even today. It's all done in the name of "Good versus Evil" and the message is (sometimes subtle and sometimes blatant) that God is on our side - whatever side that might be. Caesar is always God - to those who will worship him as such.

In this regard, we are both pleased and challenged. We are a government by the people, for the people and with the people. We claim to be a free nation and we pride ourselves in the belief that we have something to say about our destiny. But the real price of freedom is responsibility! Those who live under dictatorial regimes are not nearly as accountable for the actions of their Caesars as we are for ours. As long as we are a government by the people, we become the very Caesar to whom we pay tribute.

The reality of our responsibility strikes home every time we go to the polls. That's our privilege. But what about our responsibility before the election? What determines the lever we pull, the button we push, or the choice we punch? How does a person who claims to render to God choose who Caesar should be, or attempt to tell the Caesar on a ballot what he/she should do?

Some sort of bias will always be part and parcel of the voting process. But, on what will the bias be based? If we are rendering to God, then how do we determine our choices?

Certainly no one rendered to God more consistently and more totally than Jesus. Since we claim Him as our model, we might look at how He made His choices. Remember when He had to choose the His disciples? The Gospel writers tell us that He went off and prayed. He prayed for Himself (that He would make the right choice) and He prayed for those He would choose (that they would be true to the message of His Father).

There aren't too many campaign managers who encourage us to pray over our voting choice. But the example Jesus gave us suggests that we do exactly that - that we pray over any choices life calls us to make. Only those who have closed off their minds and set themselves up as gods are without the need of such prayer. And only those minds that are open enough to take a chance on God's changing them can afford to pray over anything at all.

It's a far cry between the prayer that says, "Lord, may others be wise enough to see things my way," and that prayer that says, "Lord, open my heart and touch my mind with Your wisdom that I might see Your ways in the choices I make." In reality, the second version is a prayer and the first is more of an attempt to manipulate the divine.



But, the God Who responds to our prayer, the God Who opens hearts does so within the confines of the human. Searching brings wisdom and we are called to search. Do we dare to read about the views of other candidates or do we allow our self-interest, our bias, or our paranoia to close us off to anything we don't want to hear? Only when we're willing to do our homework and to open our hearts in prayer can we truly render to God in the choices we make.

Jesus is not making a political statement in the Gospel Lesson, today. But His entire life and all of His words put together make a very loud statement to anyone who wishes to render to God in the way they relate to Caesar.

The gospel, as we have it, was offered to us long before our forefathers drafted the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution of the United States. And when those drafts were made, they were offered as an attempt to put biblical values into some kind of politically feasible framework. This, however, has not always been the way things have worked out. We have done, and continue to do, some pretty wonderful things as a nation. But we have also done, in the past - and continue to do, in the present - some things that run counter to everything this Gospel is about. Only when we can recognize both of these realities can we be moved to render to God and to Caesar as a Gospel people. The only alternative is to believe that there is no God but Caesar, and that's exactly what some people in first century Palestine proclaimed just before they killed Jesus.

In the elections that are taking place in a couple weeks, - as well as in the decisions we are asked to make at our Congregation and Corporation Meeting - we are being called upon to make decisions and to make our voices heard. All I'm saying, today, is that we need to do so prayerfully and with as complete an understanding of the issues as possible.

Jesus understood what was at stake when He was asked to voice His opinion on taxes, as well as on other issues. He knew what was going to happen as He entered Jerusalem, that first Palm Sunday. And, He also knew what God had called Him to do when He rose from prayer in the Garden at Gethsemane. As those who profess to be followers of His life and His teachings, where do we receive the right to discard that example and follow our own paths?

Let us pray:

Father God, we ask for your guidance as we face the decisions of life. Help us to know what's truly at stake when we are counted among the voters in civil matters. Help us to remember what's at stake when we take a stand on matters of faith. Open our hearts and our minds to Your Will as we conduct our individual ministries in Jesus' name. Empower us, by Your Holy Spirit, to be true to the Christ we proclaim and to the Jesus we love. Amen.

