

CAESAR OR GOD?

A Sermon by the Rev. Janet L. Abel
Preached on the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, October 22, 2017

Lectionary Readings: Exodus 33:12-16 and Matthew 22:15-22.

Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees and Scribes All Hate Jesus and Plot to Rid Themselves of Him

This passage of Matthew 22:15-22 is famous, pithy advice for life, seemingly simple advice. Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. But I don't think it's all that simple. Not always. So how about some context before we really get into our passage for this morning. What's been happening in Matthew these last few chapters? What led to this apparently interesting question? And we're set up for this question.

We're told about the Pharisees and the Herodians and the Sadducees and the scribes — these are all people who live and work in and around Jerusalem. They're the educated ones, the leaders. They're trying to trip Jesus up. We know this. They're not trying to get taught. They're not trying to discover who Jesus really is because they're curious, because they respect him. They may call him teacher. You know, they're setting him up. They don't really think he's a teacher and doesn't have their education. He's from the sticks.

That's what Gallilee represents to the people who live in Jerusalem. It's like Jesus is someone from Arkansas. There's nothing wrong with Arkansas. I've driven through it; it's very pretty. But you know, if you're from

New York City or Los Angeles, and you think that person's from Arkansas. What do they know? That's what Gallilee represents to them. So we know they're setting him up.

That's what's been happening. Jesus has been telling the series of stories he calls parables, symbolic stories, and they've been very rough, basically telling the Pharisees and the Herodians and the Sadducees that they're on the wrong page. They're leading people in the wrong way, and they're going to get it. It really hasn't been a nice conversation in the temple. This is toward the end of our story, so we know what's going to happen in a couple days in Jerusalem.

These are Jesus' enemies, and they're getting really mad. They want Jesus kicked out of there. They want to kill him. They also want to trip him up. They want to make him look bad to his followers. The Pharisees, of course, the educated priestly class. The Herodians were named for King Herod. The Herod line was not Jewish per se; they were not Israelites. They were put in power by the Romans, and they were hated, right along with the Romans. The scribes were the lawyers. You have to have lawyers, you know, but they were religious specialists. All there to trip Jesus up.

They all have different politics from each other. The Pharisees and the Herodians didn't exactly agree with each other. The

Pharisees hated the Romans, and the Herodians owed their power to the Romans for colluding. They were like the tax collectors and the others who were wealthy and were working right along with the Romans, and the Herodians wanted to get along with them. The Pharisees wanted the Romans out of Israel. Different political factions. We know something about that, don't we?

The Jewish People Despise the Roman Coinage and Resent the Image of Caesar

The Jewish people even had feelings about the coin of the realm. When you spend money, do you spend a lot of time thinking about who's on the money? I don't. Sometimes I look. The heads on our dollar bills have gotten bigger, and there's a hint of color in our dollar bills. I think of that when I go overseas, as I just did, and European money and Australian money and New Zealand money are very colorful. They've done that for years.

We actually got our idea from them about enlarging the head. It's harder to counterfeit. That's why countries do that. The eyes and the face are the hardest things on your bill to reproduce illegally. I know that from my banking days. I used to take classes on how to spot a bad bill because the tellers and banks actually get stuck if they accept bad bills. Believe it or not, you always are looking.

I wouldn't want to look at my money and think oh, Alexander Hamilton, what a bum, I hate him. Actually, I think he should stay on the bill because he's the founder of our treasury. And that great Broadway musical, based on that big book. I like Alexander Hamilton. He's also handsome, isn't he?

But the Jewish people look at their money, and look at Caesar, that's who is stamped on their money, and think, oh, Caesar, I hate him. And they hated him for lots of reasons. The Roman government wasn't exactly a nice government, in charge of the known world. Caesar set himself up as God. They might have different feelings about their politicians, but if in fact they think they are God, you might disagree violently. The Jewish people certainly did, and every time they had to use that money, which when they paid their tax, they did, it had to be the money of the realm. They hated more and more what it represented. It didn't represent good things for the Jewish people. They weren't in charge of their own lives, their own government, their courts; everything was in charge of the Romans.

Pontius Pilate, you've heard of him, he was the procurator in charge during those years of Jesus' active ministry. He was only in power about ten years, and he was completely terrible at what he did in his job. He was assigned by Rome to be the real ruler, even though there was Herod on the throne. The Pharisees were running the temple. Pilate was in charge. He was completely clueless about the Jews and what their religion represented.

One of his first acts when he got to Jerusalem was that he brought plaques of Caesar with him. He wanted to show the people who was really in charge. So he had those plaques installed in the temple. How do you think that went over with a people who are not permitted to say God's name aloud, let alone look at his picture. There's Caesar all over the place in their Holy of Holies in their temple. He also had the water diverted at one time out of the temple because Romans needed the water, and he had the temple water, which was

considered holy, diverted. That didn't go over well either.

Pilate was always trying to remind the people who was really in charge. Who really is in charge? Herod Antipas, he was one of the brothers that took over for his father, King Herod. He got to be regional king by the powers that be, and they were in charge. Tax collectors, they work for Rome, collecting taxes.

We Live in a World of Taxes
and Politics, but Pastors
Tread
Carefully in Both Realms

Taxes have always been with us, haven't they? How do we feel about taxes? It's not April yet, but it's going to be. And how do we feel about the IRS? Who likes getting a phone call from the IRS? Actually, they don't call, ever. But if you get one of those phone calls, hang up. They send you letters. And they're not nice letters to get, either. No one really likes them. I once had a friend who pretended to be from the IRS and called me up, and I nearly passed out. He got me good, I'll tell you. You really don't like hearing from the IRS, but it's a fact of our lives.

Did you know that when you become ordained as a minister, you can opt out. There's a period of time when you can say, "I don't believe in paying taxes." And you don't. But I have to tell you, I had a friend tell me that. People gave me advice, "Hey, Janet, don't pay a tax. You'll do a lot better than Social Security. You take that money and invest it, and you're going to do much better." But I couldn't opt out when I really thought about it. I'll be honest with you. Of course, there are things I don't like my money going to a tax, and I'm sure the same is true for you.

There's lots of stuff that I don't like, but there's stuff I do like, and my tax goes to that too. I like it that there are firefighters on call. Should my house catch fire, there's somebody I can call, and they're going to come. I like my streets being paved; I like the street lights on, and all the other stuff that make up daily life. My taxes do good things as well as bad things, so I was honest when I really thought about it. I couldn't opt out, not really, and still be honest.

We live in a world with politics in it, and we're all political. As a minister, Art brought up the topic of politics last week, and of course, with a passage like this, we have to talk about it. But we're careful, as we know. We have a separation of church and state. We can be political and we are, but we can't be too political or we'll lose our tax-exempt status. We can't tell you who to vote for. If we get too political, you get in big trouble. But of course as a voting person, I pay attention.

But I'm going to confess something to you. On Wednesday mornings, I meet with a group of women ministers. We have breakfast together, and we chat about our week. And often the talk turns to politics. My fellow ministers from Binghamton and the surrounding area, some of them are extremely political. They go to rallies and they protest, and they participate in marches. I'm going to be honest with you. I don't tend to do that. I pay as much attention as I can.

Here's what I've chosen to do, especially given current-day politics. Well, a couple of presidential elections, but especially the last one. I don't start my day listening to the news. I say what I do, how I've chosen to cope with the way things are going. I used to listen to NPR almost all the time, especially in the morning with my radio with my alarm

so I'd wake up and be listening to the news. And I've got to tell you I don't want to do that anymore. I haven't done that in a while. That's not how I want to wake up in the morning. I just don't want to wake up listening to that, so I listen to the music. Music without ads in the morning.

By the time my day is winding down and I'm making dinner, then I can listen to the news. I turn NPR on, I'll watch TV, I'll read the newspapers. I pay attention, but I try not to let it take me over. We all know that you can listen to the news 24-7. It's CNN and all the rest of it. We have residents who do that, but I just can't do that. I am not as political as some. That's not the answer, is it? Don't always listen. I'd much rather listen to music than the news.

Flying over North Korea, I Wonder Who Is in Charge, not Rocket Man but God

But I also just traveled around the world, as you know. Politics is a part of our lives. I flew to Australia and New Zealand by way of China. I told a couple of you these stories. Eastern China Air. It was an airline and there was an airport, but I got a sense of the oppressiveness of that government, even just being in the airport and even being on their airplane. It is really different. We were ordered to do things, not asked. Of course, I complied with the stewardesses' suggestions. But it was done in a kind of a voice, and in a different way that I knew I was in a different world with lots of people who lived very oppressed lives.

I prayed for them as well as I prayed for myself and my fellow seatmates as we flew over Korea. It made a difference flying right over the peninsula of Korea, with our elected leader calling the current North Korean

leader the "Rocket Man," mocking him. He could very well have sent off a missile right then and there, and we would have been toast. And so I asked myself as I flew on that plane, several times, in fact, "Who is in charge? Who is really in charge? Who do I want to look to as I fly over North Korea? It wasn't Republicans or Democrats. Of course, it was God. Whose am I?" The answer to that question is God.

Of course, I am a political person, and I live in this world. And what difference does that make? So I ask you, "How to cope in these times? Rendering unto Caesar and to God? Jesus gave very practical advice. When you're living in this world, you have to pay taxes. You give. You do what you have to do. But you also live in a world created by God. You are a spiritual being. You have to render there as well. Maybe more so. And the choices aren't always easy or clear.

There's been a lot of talk about football players kneeling during the National Anthem. There are a lot of people upset by that stand, and others completely understand. There's a bunch of us in the middle. Who are they rendering to when they get on their knees? Who do you think?

I love history. I'm reading a great book on Washington. It's a tome. It was written by Ron Chernow. He's the same author who also wrote *Alexander Hamilton*, a book I highly recommend. Fascinating stuff. The real founding of our country. Why these people became so famous. Washington became the commander-in-chief of our armies in part because he was very tall. And I say that it's true. People liked the way he looked. He had a great seat on his horse. He never won a single battle. He was involved in the French and Indian war. He was a colonel and had a

terrible track record. A lot of his battles didn't turn out well at all.

But he was tall and he was part of the Continental Congress, and everybody liked him. He dressed well and ordered all his clothes from England. He made sure he always looked just so and so was the livery of his sleighs. He had a big plantation down in Mount Vernon. That was the choice for the commander-in-chief.

Those were different times, but they too had to figure out how to render unto Caesar and unto God. They rebelled against a government they found oppressive. And there are times in life when that happens. I think of the Christians living in the time of Germany with Hitler, who was making himself head of the church. a lot of them caved, but I don't know what I would do. They wanted to live. They were terrified. Some didn't and were sent to concentration camps. Rendering unto God and Caesar is not always clear or easy.

I was just in New Zealand, actually in the capital, when they were electing their new prime minister. So it was a busy time. It is

not a huge city at all, but it is the capital, and they elected Jucinda Ardern, who is a 37-year-old woman, member of the Labour Party, and I watched a debate with her, and they were so nice to each other. Among other things, they were kind of reasonable, and everything stayed civil. Well, New Zealand does have only 4 million people, so it may be easier, I thought, to be a politician there, but it was nice to watch that. It is possible to be civil. And she comes across as very thoughtful. I don't really know her positions on things, but I'm glad she won. Maybe it's easier to render under her. I don't know.

Politics is important, and yet they're momentary because we know this too shall pass. It's a blip in time, really. No matter who's in charge — the Romans, the Labour Party, the Whigs of Washington's era, the Republicans, the Democrats — God is with us. Moses asked God, "Are you going to be with us? Because we're not going to do this without you." Love, grace, kindness, and justice — they matter most, and they always will. They're in charge.

Amen.