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Faith and Politics

Matthew 22:15-22

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A film that received some critical acclaim this year, I did not see it, is called, *Man on Wire*. It is about what happened on the morning of Aug. 7, 1974, when after months of preparation and years of dreaming, a French daredevil named Philippe Petit stepped into the sky above Lower Manhattan. For almost 45 minutes he ambled back and forth on a metal cable strung between the towers of the World Trade Center, a feat of illegal tightrope walking that, according to a New York Police Department sergeant who recounted Mr. Petit's act of physical poetry, would more aptly be described as dancing.

Preaching on faith and politics is sort of like daring to walk and dance on a tightrope between two skyscrapers. People wonder why in the world anyone would do it. The risks are great, the danger real, and the hope of a successful conclusion doubtful. Nevertheless, as our nation finally nears a presidential election that has been in the forefront of our cultural life for almost two full years, it is necessary to venture forth, however unsteadily, upon a tight rope of words to talk about the delicate balance of faith and politics.

Most people who talk to me about politics have very strong views about the candidates and the upcoming election. You will see bumper stickers in the church parking lot for both John McCain and Barack Obama. Regardless of who you support, millions of Americans are disappointed and disillusioned by the nature of how politics is practiced because of the influence of money, the lack of true dialogue, the absence of civility and decency in discussion and speech among citizens associated with the major political parties, the media and among those running for the highest positions of office. The name calling, distortion, and demonizing of those who disagree with one's position is discouraging and certainly not Christian. Some of us wonder, "*Are politics and politicians making life better or making life worse?*"

A surgeon, an architect, and a politician were considering the question of whose profession was the oldest. The surgeon said, "*I think my line of work wins hands down. After all, Eve was created from Adam's rib – that sounds like surgery to me.*"

"*Maybe,*" the architect said, "*but before Adam, order was created out of chaos. That was an architectural accomplishment.*"

"*Sure,*" the politician said, "*but first someone had to create the chaos.*"

In the chaos of our culture, apathy, ignorance, and choosing not to vote or participate as a citizen are not viable alternatives. We should never forget how precious the

opportunity is to be able to cast our vote. It is critically important for our civic and national life that Christians be informed and involved citizens in our communities, states, and in the nation as a whole. George Burns once said it's, *"Too bad that all the people who really know how to run the country are busy driving cabs and cutting hair."*

All of us must be careful in not assuming or asserting that people of faith may think or vote in only one particular way. Sitting among our pews are followers of Jesus who hold very different views and positions on a wide variety of policy issues. **What is important is that our faith informs our politics and not the other way around. The teaching of Jesus Christ, as we can best understand it from a thorough and prayerful reading of the gospels, should be what most informs our world-view and how we live our life, including our politics.**

The debate about the role of faith and politics is not a new one. In today's gospel, when people wanted to get Jesus in deep trouble, they asked him his position on a political issue, in this case taxes, in order to trap him in what he said so they could use it against him. This is a tactic many people still employ in our time. Listen to Matthew 22:15-22:

15 Then the **Pharisees** went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 So they sent their disciples to him, along with the **Herodians**, saying, "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. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21 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."* 22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away."

This trick question about paying taxes seeks to force Jesus either to alienate his countrymen who oppose the Roman occupation of Jerusalem and Israel or to make himself subject to arrest for refusing to pay the Roman tax.

The Herodians represent those who support and cooperate with the Roman regime in order to benefit from that occupation in terms of jobs, contracts, power, and money. They support paying the tax.

The Pharisees were more popular with the people because in principle they resented and resisted the tax, but they did not go as far as the Zealots (or nationalists or patriots,

same group pick your word) who publicly resisted paying the tax. The specific tax in question was the census tax or head tax instituted in 6 AD when Judea became a Roman province. The tax, which could only be paid in Roman coin, played a key role in triggering Jewish nationalism that led to the disastrous uprising of 66-70 AD during which Jerusalem was invaded and almost completely destroyed by the Romans.

So can you now picture the scene - Jesus, the Herodians, and Pharisees standing in the sacred precinct of the Temple, the Pharisees pulling out the Roman coin with its idolatrous image of the Emperor and asking their profoundly political question, phrased in religious terms (see some things never change).

Jesus' answer hinges on "*and to God what is God's.*" Loyalty to God is a higher, ultimate loyalty than to any country, government, person, or party. The kingdom of God represented and announced by Jesus embraces and touches all of life and is for people of every nation. For Christians, there is no distinction between "sacred" and "secular." Everything, whether nature, living creatures, even governments, are God's concern and therefore should be ours as well.

Our faith shapes our political beliefs – our views on issues, what issues are important, as well as how we vote and whom we support.

Our faith shapes our economic beliefs – how we earn a living, conduct our business, how much we live on, and how much we give away.

For devoted followers of Jesus, no aspect of our lives will be untouched by his influence and leadership.

Sometimes, however, it isn't easy for Christians to know what side of an issue a politician is on. It reminds me of a favorite story of a Tennessee legislator answering a constituent's vague letter asking about the "whiskey situation."

The legislator wrote back:

"I had not intended to discuss this controversial subject at this particular time.

However, I want you to know that I do not shun controversy. On the contrary, I will take a stand on any issue at any time, regardless of how fraught with controversy it may be. You have asked me how I feel about whiskey. Here's how I stand on the question:

*If, when you say "whiskey," you mean: the Devil's brew, the poison scourge, the bloody monster that defiles innocence, dethrones reason, destroys the home, creates misery and poverty – yes literally takes the bread from the mouths of little children; if you mean the drink that topples the Christian man and woman from the pinnacle of*

righteous, gracious living into the bottomless pit of degradation, despair, shame, and helplessness, then certainly, I am against it with all my power.

But *if*, when you say “*whiskey*,” you mean: the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the ale that is consumed when good fellows get together; that puts a song in their hearts, and laughter on their lips, and the warm glow of contentment in their eyes; if you mean Christian cheer; if you mean the stimulating drink that puts the spring in an old gentleman’s step on a frosty morning; if you mean the drink, the sale of which pours into our treasury untold millions of dollars which are used to provide tender care for our crippled children, our blind, our deaf, pitiful, aged, and infirm, and to build highways, hospitals, and schools; then certainly I am in favor of it.

This is my stand, and I will not compromise.”<sup>1</sup>

Questions about whiskey, or taxes or other issues are quite frequently more complicated than they may appear at first or on the surface. Jesus’ answer is clarifying, first of all, that people belong to God. We are God’s possession and all people, no matter how young or how old or where they live, are precious in God’s sight. Secondly, as Christians we are accountable to God first and foremost and then also to the law.

**What we believe about God, the law, politics, and the government is very much shaped by where and when we live.** For example, when we benefit from the government because it protects us and our freedoms, provides countless opportunities and services, and agrees with our worldview, we tend to see government positively. I can still remember my cousin Josh, who is now a pastor, complaining about taxes being taken out of his first paycheck when he was a teenager. He couldn’t believe how much it was. His father, a teacher of US history at a junior high school told him, “*You’ve got to remember for that you get your Navy, Air Force, nuclear weapons, interstate highway system and on and on.*” The Apostle Paul’s view of governing authorities as expressed in Romans 13:1-7 reflects the fact that he enjoys Roman citizenship with all the rights and privileges that went with it. Since Paul benefited from his citizenship he could say, “*There is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.*” However, we wouldn’t have a nation if the Founding Father’s had taken those words literally because they would not have resisted the authority of King George III.

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<sup>1</sup> William Bausch, *A World of Stories*, (p 354).

Even within the Bible, one finds a position about the Roman Government that is quite different than Paul's and that is John's view in Revelation. John's view of the governing authorities under Emperor Domitian in a context of great difficulty and persecution is quite negative (see Revelation 19:1-3, for example). When we're persecuted or harmed by the government, we are less likely to see it as the instrument of God. Certainly Christians living under a brutal dictator such as Stalin or Hitler would be more inclined to John's view than to Paul's. The same people who have a high view of a president's or government's authority in the US, might have a very different belief if they were living in Cuba, Burma, or North Korea.

Those of us blessed to live in the United States are fortunate in a host of ways that we enjoy every day, including the freedom to safely practice our faith compared to our brothers and sisters in places like the Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, or China. Ultimately, when we die, what nation we lived in won't matter. What will matter is how we worshipped and served the God of the universe before whom the nations are nothing. We are to fulfill our responsibilities as Christian citizens, remembering our primary allegiance is to God and to doing the Lord's will. **What is important is that the faith of Jesus informs our politics and not the other way around.** Sometimes it is helpful when our perspective is getting too small to think of the beautiful pictures of the earth from space that do not show borders or countries. Isaiah says that compared with God (Isaiah 40:15,17), *"Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales; see he takes up the isles like fine dust. All the nations are as nothing before him; they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness."*

As Christians, we can model, often beginning in our own families, but also among friends at church, work, or school **the ability to dialogue, to listen without condemnation and with a desire to understand another point of view.** **We can practice mutual respect and civility in discussion and speech** rather than the rude, crude, insulting demeaning, name calling which fill all forms of the media today. Another thing we can do as Christian citizens is to **have friends with different points of view than our own and we can stop demonizing and labeling** those who hold a different position or with whom we disagree. Being careful about what kind of speech we saturate our mind and heart in is important to our soul. Paul says in Ephesians 4:29-31, *"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of*

*redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice...*” Christians sincerely seeking to live out those few verses would change the level of discourse in our country.

Regardless of who wins the presidential election on Tuesday there will be millions of Americans who are thrilled and millions who will be disappointed. My hope is that no matter who is elected on November 4<sup>th</sup> that all our elected representatives and all American citizens will begin being more serious and intentional about being the **UNITED** States of America. I pray for a renewed focus on the common good, on honesty, justice, integrity, service and what is best for the country. Regardless of whether we are happy or heartbroken by the result, there is still much we can do as individual Christian citizens to be people who improve our communities, state, nation, and world by being people who trust God, serve Jesus, and are instruments of the Holy Spirit in doing the Lord's will in these challenging times. May God help us all.

### **Prayer**

Almighty God, you have blessed us to be born in or to live in this good land. Enable us always to remember your generosity and constantly do your will. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogance, and from every evil course of action. Make us who come from many nations with many different languages a united people. Defend our liberties and give those whom we have entrusted with the authority of government the spirit of wisdom, that there might be justice and peace in our land. When times are prosperous, let our hearts be thankful; and, in troubled times like these, do not let our trust in you fail. We ask all of this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

**Word of Faith:** *“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”* 2 Chronicles 7:14

### **A Final Word from Our Founders**

In writing his book *Founding Faith*, Steven Waldman notes how the Founders of our nation mostly assessed religion through the prism of one question: does it promote good behavior? Though each of the Founders he studied in *Founding Faith* (George

Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, and James Madison) started at different religious places, they ended up at the end of their lives whittling their creeds down to a few simple items:

**Benjamin Franklin:** *"That the most acceptable service we can render to [God], is doing good to his other children."*

**John Adams:** *"I have learned nothing of importance to me, for they have made no change in my moral or religious creed, which has for 50 or 60 years been contained in four short words: 'Be just and good.'"*

**Thomas Jefferson:** "1) That there is one only God, and he all-perfect. 2) That there is a future state of rewards and punishments. 3) That to love God with all thy heart and thy neighbor as thyself, is the sum of religion."

**George Washington:** "In politics, as in religion, my tenets are few and simple; the leading one of which, and indeed that which embraces most others, is to be honest and just ourselves, and to exact it from others; meddling as little as possible in their affairs where our own are not involved. If this maxim was generally adopted, wars would cease and our swords would soon be converted into reap-hooks and our harvests be more peaceful, abundant and happy." (Washington letter to James Anderson, December 25, 1795).