

SERMON- Proper 24 (A)
Charles R. Cowherd

Exodus 33:12-23

Psalms 99

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

St. Timothy's (Herndon)
October 22, 2023

Matthew 22:15-22

OPENING:

Cast your memory back, for a moment, to your youth, and ask yourself:

“Who was the *first president* that you remember praying for in church?”

(Apologies for this exercise if you did not grow up in church, or did not grow up in a church that prayed for their leaders by name.)

My earliest recollection is of praying for “Ronald” (Reagan) as President and “Gerald” (Baliles), whom I thought had the funniest name, as Governor.

I am guessing here this morning that we might have some ‘Dwight D. Eisenhower’s’, and maybe even a ‘Harry Truman,’ or (gasp!) a ‘FDR.’

POLITICS:

While I was in Seminary I served at a church that was famous, during the Civil War, for when the congregation, under Union occupation at the time, was forced to pray aloud for “President Abraham Lincoln” and the minister refused, so they hauled him out, and, while that was happening, someone from the choir dropped a hymnal on head of the arresting officer from the balcony.

I served at that same church in 2016, and I remember the Sunday morning after that year’s election, and my supervisor (the rector of the church) looking over my shoulder as I was checking the Prayers of the People from the lectern, and him making sure that the new President-Elect’s name was included on the prayer list.

This year is, mercifully, an off-year election, but we are a year out from another bruiser. Today’s lesson provides an enigmatic guide for how to navigate this all. But it speaks to why we pray for our elected leaders, and even says something about Stewardship and what we owe to God and what we owe to the State.

We try to unpack all this, again, as the Holy Land descends into chaos. We know that the Old Testament is partly a book about how ‘church and state’ (quote unquote) interact, a book about how to live with God in a community. It starts at the smallest community, a couple (Adam and Eve), and then goes to a people (12 tribes), and then a nation (Israel), and then an empire.

It’s a ‘how to’ and ‘how not to’ instruction guide on how to be in this world.

I bring this up to cast our perspective back, to recognize the long legacy, in this age-old debate about trying to serve two masters.

But, for us this morning, let's take a look closer to home to try to make sense of it.

CHURCH + STATE:

The aforementioned Eisenhower once said this: "Our government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what (faith) it is."¹

You take that attitude, the idea of faith in America as a sort of civic religion, and then compare it with a Gandhi or a Thoreau, who bid a retreat from the world, who refused to participate in government or taxes and what have you.

Those are the two poles, we all live *between* those abstract extremes.

We live in between... in between in the very trap laid by the Pharisees for Jesus.

The Pharisees, in our story, are trying to "out" Jesus, either as a Zealot, someone looking to resist the Roman government by any means necessary,

OR "out" him as an accommodationist, a traitor, who supports the occupiers.

Jesus refuses to play that game and escapes the trap with his coin trick.

Where are we on those poles? We are, again, in between: very few of us are anarchists looking to go to jail for not paying taxes, and very few of us want a situation where the government and religion are one.

We are instead the people in between, the reformers, the good guys, the sensible folks who are looking to tweak the system. Not upturn it, or leave it behind.

In that way, we are Pharisees.

That's okay. "I am a Pharisee, and you can be one too!" might read our bumper sticker.

The Episcopal Church has tried to have it both ways, over the years.

We supported the political 'powers that be' during the American Revolution, but... we picked the wrong side, the British colonial government, and so the Church was discredited in disarray after it ended.

The Church tried to learn its lesson and so for the next few generations in the 19th century, it did not speak out against politics, it retreated...

¹Address at the Freedoms Foundation, Waldorf-Astoria, New York City, NY (12/22/52)

<https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/eisenhowers/quotes#Religion>

and became a “pseudo-monastic” institution, saying nothing in the buildup to the Civil War about slavery. One bishop proudly proclaimed that he did not vote because his Episcopal identity trumped his civic one. The legacy of that leadership was *silence* on the great moral issue of the day. The 20th century had us also try to have it both ways, when we were large and numerous, the Episcopal Church spoke up and out and for and against every issue that we could. Now, as our influence has waned, we suddenly have a problem with other Christian denominations for trying to do the same.

GOSPEL

Have I offended anyone yet? It’s okay if I have but I am not trying to. It’s just the lectionary got us out of these dangerous parables and instead all we are supposed to talk about today is politics and money!

Notice how Jesus avoids a step-by-step instruction on how to handle this. We would love it if the answers were clear, in the back of the book somewhere. We would love an endorsement of Madisonian separation of church-and-state. That’s not here. There is also no endorsement of a theocratic government like Iran or Medieval Christendom, or a Puritan village. Nor is there an endorsement of a ‘head for the hills’ exile from politics.

Instead, Jesus says look at your money and look at your neighbor. Then decide who/what bears the image of God. For Jesus, the coin bearing Caesar’s face did not. But, the person, the Pharisee, sitting next to you in the pew does bear God’s image. The person on the street corner begging for food does. The politician whom you cannot stand... he/she also bears God’s image, the *imago dei*, however distorted behind political makeup that he/she wears.

Jesus does not give us any easy answers, his coin trick merely raises the ethical bar and says: “you have got to figure out what is God’s and what’s not.” The tough answer is everything comes from God. So we have to discern whether... our tax dollars, our political contributions, our consumer spending, our hours watching cable news, in fact, bear God’s image, and what are we indeed doing with the gifts that God has given us?

STEWARDSHIP

Here it comes, finally. Here is my entirely self-serving interpretation of this passage and how it ties to Stewardship.

I talked a few weeks back how when you give to the Church and you make your offering, it turns something dirty and secular, crinkly and green, be it cold hard cash or rusted metallic coinage, it turns that into something sacred and holy.

(Remember our cleaning lady who returned the bill left here on the ground.)

Liturgically, when this happens, and I take the plates and raise it up to God, that's me (and you) saying "I am not worthy of this."

I feel that way as your Rector, when you entrust me and this parish with your money. I feel like "this is not mine, this is God's, take it from me."

You are saying that you know that society says that money is the most important part of who we are, and you have decided to give some of it up. Money is what our culture says makes or break you, and you are saying something different in your practice of stewardship.

You are saying, with your time, talent, and treasure, by your monetary offering in the physical plate every Sunday, in your online donations, in your checks that come in the mail, in your volunteering at Coffee Hour, in your visiting a sick parishioner, in your attending that church meeting, you are saying:

"This is not mine, it's yours God."

You are saying that the voracious Media that consumes us, that makes us feel so good about our political opinions, that gives us what we want in terms of emotional and moral interpretation of the world around us, you are saying: "I am going to give my shekel" to this church.

I am going to give to an organization that is not there to serve me, but others.

You are saying to our political parties, which is where our identity's are increasingly tied to, you are saying "the image that I bear for this world"—my currency, my coin of the realm—is that of a Christian, an Episcopalian, a member of St. Timothy's Church in Herndon, VA, more so than I am a Republican or a Democrat. We pray to our leaders because they matter, and they too bear the image of God, but what they have is also from God We pray to those leaders even they don't ultimately define us.

It's a bold declaration in the year of our Lord 2023, to say that you wish to claim your identity, to turn over that coin and say: I am going to bet on this strange horse, St. Timothy's.

So I tremble when I receive your pledge card, however paltry or substantial, and sign the response. I tremble when multiple folks came up to me and said: "Let me pay back the money that our cleaning lady found and make it right."

I tremble because You are saying my identity is my identity in Christ, here's how much I care and I am going to entrust it to this thing called the Church.

AMEN