

Sermon: "Religion is Never a Private Enterprise"

Sunday, October 16, 2011

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Christ Church, Shaker Heights

Proper 24 Year A 2011: Matthew 22:15-22

Let's take a little impromptu poll with a show of hands.

How many of you believe that your religion and faith life are a private enterprise that should never enter into the public realm?

How many of you responded yes to that question based on what you believe the Bible says about the role your faith should play in the secular world?

How many of you responded yes, based on what you believe the U.S. Constitution says about the separation of Church and State?

And finally, how many of you responded yes because you are weary of extremist religious ideologues and politicians who want to make this country into a theocracy, a theocracy made in their image of God?

If you responded yes to the question that you believe that your religion and the rest of your life are mutually exclusive realms, your opinion would be at odds with the Hebrew prophets and with Jesus. This means the same is true if you based that belief on what you think the Bible says. The Bible actually calls us to *actively* raise the voice of faith in the public square. It is our responsibility to hold leaders in the public realm morally and ethically accountable to behaviors that the scriptures tell us are sacred to God. Religious faith in the Bible is *never a private enterprise*.

If you responded yes to the question based on what you believe the U.S. Constitution says about the separation of Church and State, well, you need to take a remedial course in American history. There is no such clause in the Constitution. What we do have is the First Amendment, which states actually that, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The concept of separation of Church and State finds its origin in a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote to a group of Baptists in Danbury, Connecticut, who as a minority religion, felt persecuted by the established Congregational church in that state. The reality is Jefferson came up with idea of the separation of church and state to protect religion expression from the state and not the state from religion. Interestingly it is the later, incorrect understanding of Jefferson's concept that many people have come to believe in our own time.

And finally, if you responded yes to the question because you are weary of extremist religious and political ideologues who want to make this country into a theocracy - a theocracy made in their image of God - I am in your corner! I too am weary of these folks.

It is this last reason that is the most compelling one to keep religion out of the public realm, especially in our time when religious ideologues and politicians continue to make unholy alliances with one another as they strive to subject their image of God upon the rest of us.

But while it may be compelling, it is not convincing.

Today's exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees and Herodians is a reminder that our faith is never to be a private endeavor. It is also an example of the biblical imperative to bring the voice of our faith into the public square.

Prior to today's story Jesus has told two damning parables against the practices of the religious and political establishment, here represented by the Pharisees and Herodians. These guys are religious and politicians ideologues who are infuriated because Jesus is pointing out their unethical, unscrupulous behavior. So they plot to entrap Jesus so he will be condemned and eliminated from the public realm. To do this they ask Jesus if it is "lawful [for a Jew] to pay taxes to the Roman emperor or not?" It's a trick question. If Jesus declares that the Torah forbids paying taxes that sustain the Roman occupation of Israel, as well as maintain pagan temples, he can be arrested for sedition by Rome's security forces. On the other hand, if he claims that the Torah allows paying taxes to the emperor, knowing how such taxes are used, his teaching will be denounced by those who are rigorous in their interpretation of religious obligations.

Clearly the inflammatory issue of paying taxes was as real during the ministry of Jesus as it is for us today.

But Jesus does not fall into the trap. He knows there is malice behind this question. Jesus responds to his adversaries, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?" Jesus then asks for a coin used to pay the tax, which would have been a denarius, a unit of the Roman currency. This coin had the image of the emperor on it. The currency used for Jewish religious practices had no images on it, honoring the second commandment to not make any graven images.

Jesus asks his adversaries whose image is on the coin? They respond, "the emperor's." Jesus then tells them, well then, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

Jesus' reply seems to create a dualism between the sacred and the secular, between church and state. Give to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God what is God's he says. But a closer examination shows this is simply not so.

Jesus is not dividing the world into two realms with two sovereigns, the realm of God and the realm of the emperor. The Gospel writer Matthew is a monotheist who resists that kind of dualism. Matthew is not for a moment advocating the separation of religion and politics, of God and Caesar. The truth is neither Jesus nor any of Israel's prophets ever made such a separation. Instead Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God embraces ALL of life

Jesus understands that every person of faith has a double loyalty or citizenship: one to the nation in which he lives and the other to the Kingdom of God.

For Christians this means that a person of faith owes allegiance to the State for things like safety and for security against lawlessness and civic disorder. He owes the State for public services like sanitation, roads, education, care of the vulnerable, the hungry, the homeless, the destitute, medical services, clean water. Only a stable, well-funded government can supply these things. Being a citizen of this secular realm means the rendering of adequate taxes to support the common good and welfare. This is our responsibility to the emperor.

Christians are also citizens of God's Kingdom and as such owe allegiance to God and to the Gospel. As citizens of this realm we are to uphold the ethics and morality of that Kingdom. These ethics and morality can be distilled from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers.

Ideally these two realms of Church and State should not clash, as the voice of the faithful citizens of both realms makes their voices heard in the public square, ensuring that the righteousness, mercy and peace of God's realm inform the good governance of the emperor's realm. But too many people of faith have, for a myriad of reasons, forgotten or ignored the call of the prophets and of Jesus to raise their voice of faith. Our voices have either been co-opted by people who represent bad religion or by secularists who distrust or fear the voice of faith and desire to push us out of the public square.

When we honor our faith's belief that all of life is one realm under the sovereignty of God it is a failure on our part to be good citizens of either realm. That sets the stage for big trouble. History repeatedly proves that untold strife takes root in a nation and its society when people of faith refuse to lift their voices in the public square. The absence of this voice means that square becomes abandoned to selfish, unscrupulous, partisan people who care little for the true ways of God's realm.

H. Richard Niebuhr, one of the great Protestant theologians of the 20th century wrote a book titled "Christ and Culture". In the book Niebuhr laments how society was striving to silence the moral/ religious voice in public affairs and warned of the tragic results of such silence. He believed that without a moral voice government and the economy would run amuck and eventually fail. We are seeing this very thing happen as the unchecked quest for power and greed has led us to the multiple crises' we face as a society today.

Niebuhr wrote of five different ways Christians have historically handled their relationship between their faith and the state, or what he called faith and culture. It is the final relationship, which he called Christ Transforming Culture, that Neibuhr believes God calls us too. Christ Transforming Culture states that the church and every Christian have the responsibility to transform and influence society and bring about social reform for the good of all.

As people of faith our ultimate responsibility is to God and God's Kingdom. We must grapple with the political, religious and economic malaise of our own time if we are to find a way out of it to a better way of life. God is calling us to name and counter the hypocritical Pharisees and Herodians who dominate the public square, with the wisdom of Jesus. Reclaiming our role as good citizens of the two realms we live in, Christ can and will transform the culture morass we find ourselves in and God's Kingdom will come that much closer to reality when we do.

Amen.