Resisting Spiritual Amnesia in a Time of Catastrophe

Matthew 22:15-22

I want to qualify something here at the beginning, that this will not be a political sermon, but I do want to speak briefly to our current political moment, if I may. As we wind down this last quarter of the year, we find ourselves in something of a holding pattern, a pregnant pause, just 3 weeks before election day in these midterm elections. Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth, famously said that as Christians, we should "Take [our Bibles] and take [our newspapers], and read both. But interpret newspapers from [our Bible]." I think, what he was speaking to is this tendency sometimes for Christians to think that being spiritual or religious is an exercise and practice separate from our civic or political concerns. I want to challenge that this understanding is misguided thinking.

It is an anxious time, to be sure. The stakes seem higher than they've ever been. And we're hold our collective breath to see what will result from voting our conscious at the voting booth. This is a moment for doing our due diligence, to sift through all the political rhetoric to discern what isn't just empty promises, that we might endorse those candidates we believe will bring about real change, in the lives of real people, in what some call a time of catastrophe. I don't need to tell you what a critical moment this is. And we also don't pretend that everything is as simple as red vs. blue, Republican vs. Democrat. Politics are rarely so cut-and-dry, and never so binary on the plethora of complex issues we're being asked to navigate today.

We can also affirm that our political system isn't the savior of the world. As long as there are human leaders in office, there will be disappointments and unkept promises, some things will be "left on the table", some voices ignored and many needs left unmet along the way.

Where I become equally invested in this time of political unrest is to consider again what is being asked of the church, and us as individual Christians. That's an important question to sit with. Now, this isn't a church that will tell you which candidates to vote for, or even what party to vote for, even though I would urge you, as a starting place, that voting in itself is not just a civic duty—and our right as a democratic nation—but also a religious responsibility. Again, I want to assure you that this isn't a political sermon. Not at least in a narrow sense of the word.

Because on one hand, you have partisan politics—in which there are clear distinctions between parties, and those divisions have never been so wide. So much, today, is heard in this partisan light. It's like a constant game of *Would You Rather*. As soon as you speak up over just about any issue, everyone immediately runs to their respective corners to announce their side. So, how political should the *Church* be when there's already enough division in the world today? Shouldn't the Church be a sanctuary of shalom, a sabbath, a refuge from all the bitterness and rivalry that is rampant?

Shouldn't Christians, and the Church more generally speaking, just keep a low profile and not get wrapped up in such partisan politics? With this understanding, Separation of Church and State makes sense—so as to not get lumped in with all the polarizing rhetoric: Keep your comments to yourself, your newspapers tucked away (as it were), and keep the main thing the main thing.

But there's a deeper meaning of the word *politics* to be concerned with. It considers the root of that word in the Greek, *polis*, which means "city" or "community". In this sense, *politics* can also carry a deeper, timeless understanding of being the *art of building community*—the ways in which we organize and structure our lives so that the community can flourish and prosper. It considers the decisions that need to be made so that no one is left behind when it comes to the basic needs of living and even thriving. What policies will help bring vitality not just to our human kin, but non-human as well, and to the environment? All of this is politics, in this deeper sense—that which concerns the *polis,* the community.

Our Christian ears should perk up with that word, *community*. When you are a Christ-follower, you are invested in matters that involve community-building. Christianity, at least the Jesus-version of it, is just as much a *political* movement

as a spiritual one, because of its concern for the community and the welfare of its people. This is to say that community and community-making is inseparable to the work of the Gospel. We remind ourselves that Jesus always went on the road, never alone, but with his companions, in community. We think of the Christian God not in terms of a singular identity but as Trinity—it is relationship through and through (Creator, Christ, and Spirit communing as one). Science affirms that in fact everything is community, and asks us to realize and grow into our relationality with one another, that everything is interconnected at the most foundational level.

So, as Christians, as the Church, in a time of catastrophe and critical change, if we are to keep the main things the main things, then we *ought* to ask ourselves: What kind of community, or *polis*, are we building? What are we doing to upend systems of privilege and disproportionate power? Are we doing everything we can to combat food insecurity, to put food on the tables of those who have less than what individuals and families need to survive? Are we providing spaces for belonging and connection to fight against the epidemic of loneliness in our world today? Are we pushing for policies that are humane and reflect the greatest concern for our planet? These are *political* questions, just as they are spiritual ones.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is being setup in his own *Would You Rather* moment. Only this isn't a simple game of opinion but a scheme to try and trap him in his own words. Representatives from both sides are there—the religious as well as political partisans representing the interests of the government and Rome. "Jesus, tell us, is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" A vote either way would have condemned him. Yet, he masterfully provides an alternate response that turns the condemnation on themselves.

First, we have to understand that the issue of taxation was THE biggest issue between pious Israelites and idolatrous Rome. It's hard to put in perspective, regarding Roman-Israelite relations at the time, just how deep the resentment and rebellion went when it came to Roman taxes. The tax in question is just ONE tax being referenced here, but historical scholars point out that there were like 12 or 13 different taxes executed by the Romans at any one time. This one particular tax in question, was a tax on each individual, and therefore not one that any one person could avoid.

And not just any currency would do to satisfy this tax that was being levied. You had to pay with a Roman coin. For the Jews, it would have been blasphemous to own a denarii coin that bore the image of Caesar, because of the first two commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me" and "You shall not make for yourself a graven image", which forbids idolatry. The Roman coin was a graven image, with all sorts of blasphemous symbolism on both sides, including the inscription for Caesar—who was likely Tiberius at the time—calling him the Son of the Divine, and on the other side the words *Pontifex Maximus*, calling him the high priest.

Listen, death and taxes right? Things that will never go away for any of us. But back then, the issue over taxes was on another level. In fact, often times taxes led to death. According to historians, in a period of nearly 300 years surrounding this time, there were 62 wars, uprisings, and rebellions all having to do with the issue of taxation. It brings a whole new meaning to being "taxed to death". You can feel how loaded this issue was. And to pay this particular tax, it required possession of a graven image.

We know from Genesis 1 that it is humans which bear the divine image, just by the mere fact of birth, of being human, that we are the image bearers of God. Other images of God are forbidden in the commandments because God already bears that image on earth in the form of us and nothing is to take that place.

When Jesus is questioned, he says, "Show me the money!" And these disciples of the Pharisees pull out one of these Roman coins, condemning themselves by the fact that they carried one in the first place. Jesus calls them hypocrites. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Well, what is Caesar's is mere coinage, graven currency. Jesus says give it back to Caesar for it has no real claim on your life.

You belong to the Creator of the heavens and the earth. In the book of Isaiah, God says: "Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." And in other place, "I have called you by name, you are mine." You are named and claimed by God.

This passage is often used to prop up the idea that we should split our allegiance between God and Empire, or rather coalesce the two into one—a religion of God & Country—it's what we're seeing today in the flag-draped cross religion of the

MAGA movement. What Jesus is saying here is much more radical. In fact, it silences these in their trickery—the ultimate mic drop, or staff drop, if you will.

Jesus doesn't discount other earthly allegiances—he doesn't say NO to the question of giving taxes to Caesar—but because we ultimately bear the Name, Image, and Likeness of the Creator, that identity should supersede all the other identities we carry and transform the way we move in the world… even the way we vote! And so, we give to God the things that are God's: we give ourselves, our hearts, our energy, our minds, our creativity, our passions. We are blessed in order to be a blessing. That blessed identity is so that we would promote the healing of our communities, to create spaces in which others can also flourish and find acceptance and belonging, to reach out in compassion to meet the needs of those who have lack. In other words, to be political ambassadors for God.

One commentator on this passage points out that Jesus carries no denarius when approached with this little test, his opponents do—the question is theirs, not his, so it is they who must contend with where their allegiance lies. In the same way, *we* have the money… so, it is our question to own up to. What does your life, my life, look like when we truly believe that we are God's? Because God doesn't really give our lives *to us* but to the world. It is given to give away. In other words, if you are God's coin, how might God want to spend you for the sake of others, for the community? This is the question for such a time as this.

Sit with that question a moment. This is Pastor Mike and I approve this message. Amen.