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God and Caesar

A couple of years back there was a remarkable student who was very active at the Chapel – actually, we are blessed with a lot of remarkable students. This particular student was a person of deep faith and intellect, someone whom others looked to as a leader on campus and off. She was the kind of student Duke would feature on youtube videos, the sort of undergrad the alumni office would put to calling up alums to ever so sweetly invite them back for homecoming weekend, the type of student the university would want leading tours for high school juniors on fine spring days. She was a person who was deeply committed to Christ, and believed in the power of the church to shape lives and culture for the better, but she was also someone who believed in the responsibility of citizenship and the potential good of government, and so she studied political science, interned with a United States senator, pondered public policy and struggled with whether her taxes were being spent in ethical ways. She gave as much time to ROTC as she did to campus ministry. She grappled with finding the right relationship between her role as an American and her citizenship in the kingdom of God, between her baptism and her passport, and when voting day came around each November she would spend hours reading, thinking, wrestling with how to cast a vote she saw as precious, a sign of her responsibility to the public well-being, informed by her faith. It seemed the central question of her time at Duke, the one that haunted her and drove her, was this: How would she be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ and serve her country well? Her story is not unique. There are many other students and non-students who parse the same question with equal passion and sincerity. The dialogue between Jesus and the Herodians and Pharisees from Matthew 22 around paying taxes to Caesar is a story for her, and for all of us who are earnestly trying to live out Christian faith and national identity, particularly in the late October intensity of a presidential election year.

From its beginnings as a minority religious community in the midst of Roman military rule to its status today as a majority faith in a secular American democracy, the church and state are like the odd old crotchety couple who have been in the neighborhood forever. It's not at all clear that they should have gotten together in the first place, and it's very difficult to tell what is really going on in the relationship, but given they've been seen together for so long, it's awfully hard to imagine them not occupying the same space.

There are essentially three ways the church has seen its role in relationship to the government that might help that student, and all of us, answer her penetrating question. The first way is what I'm calling *let the church be the church*, which might be described as the Amish way. The underlying text for this example would be John 18:36, where Jesus says "My kingdom is not of this world," and thus in this model the church is committed to being sectarian, to working out its own holiness and salvation, and stays well away from the powers of this world, especially the government. Christians in this model object on religious grounds to voting, paying taxes, and holding state jobs. This model locates God's revelation in the church alone, and remembers the horrible destruction of the European religious wars of the 17th and 18th centuries, waged by governments with the full blessing of church leadership, mostly exercised through

exterminating Christian dissenters and other religious minorities. Christians in these communities are wary of the compromises one might make when blurring ecclesial and governmental lines. They point to Jesus' execution at the hands of the Roman authorities, which was encouraged by the Chief Priests, as the example of what happens when religion and politics join hands. There is a faithful witness in this model, an image of togetherness and piety that other Christians can learn from, seen in high definition two years ago when five Amish children were executed in a Pennsylvania schoolhouse in a tragic murder-suicide, when the Amish Christian community not only rallied around the victims but reached out to the widow of the killer, a parable of forgiveness and reconciliation that could never be enacted through the government.

This model would have a touch of resonance with the Pharisees in our gospel reading. The Pharisees and the Herodians are the two communities who put the taxation question to Jesus. Rome at the time of Jesus was a brutal empire held together by military force, and the Pharisees had become puppet priests who had no influence in policy making. Their favored status with Roman officials allowed them to focus on their strictly religious concern. Let Rome do as it pleased, as long as Israel became holy.

The other side of the spectrum might be called, *Let Caesar be Caesar*. The forefather of this tradition is Martin Luther, who had a theology of two kingdoms, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, and the underlying text might be from today's passage where Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." According to this tradition, the church leads the way in the other-worldly realm of the kingdom of God, that being everything having to do with the soul, confessing sins, granting forgiveness, administering the sacraments, and going to heaven. The kingdom of the world is run by Caesar who handles the things of the flesh, especially the economy and the military. Unlike the first example in which the church distrusts and even avoids interacting with the government, in this model the church trusts the government a great deal. Christians in this example read Paul's letter to the Romans as suggesting government is divinely appointed, an agent of providence that orders human life and meets the need of the body so we in the church are free to do the real work of the soul. Christians, Luther said, should not only pay taxes but may well hold government jobs and serve in the military. Like the first example, there is simplicity here. It also has neat borders between church and state, body and soul, and earth and heaven. However, the church in this example often exaggerates the ability of the state to act with justice and compassion, and underestimates the corruption that power and influence often bring. By separating the spirit from the body so cleanly, the church loses its prophetic voice and has nothing to say when the state infringes on human dignity. History has shown this model to have had devastating consequences at times, particularly in Nazi Germany in the 1930's when the church offered nary a word of question or condemnation during the rise of the Third Reich, or for much of the 19th century in this country when the majority of the church in America was happy to preach pie in the sky and bodies to the plow, allowing government encouraged slavery to drive the American South onto the global economic stage.

Let Caesar be Caesar would be recognized by the other group of Jesus' interrogators in the story, the Herodians. The Herodians were the Roman campaign managers, uninterested in religious questions, they were there to spin Roman rule in the most favorable light, to keep the

citizens happy, and run attack ads against Caesar's opponents. They were delighted to let the Pharisees deal with the soul, so long as the Roman government was in charge of everything else.

The third model I'm calling the *Church engaging Caesar*. I offer it as the model I think most helpful for the church in America, a middle-way between the other two. The text for this model is the arc of Jesus' life and witness. At the time of this dialogue in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has no religious power beyond his own community and no political influence whatsoever. Still he makes the Herodians and the Pharisees nervous. Jesus claims both the name son of David, which would have been recognized by the Pharisees as that of the longed for Jewish Messiah, and Son of God, which would have been recognized by the Herodians as the name ascribed only to Caesar. He makes the Pharisees nervous because he upsets the traditional notion of what it means to be holy. He makes the Herodians nervous because he upsets the traditional notion of what it means to be a citizen, and these two notions, God and government, piety and citizenship, church and state, spar in the background of this question posed to Jesus: Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?

The church engaging Caesar model says there is only one kingdom, and that is the kingdom of God. There is no clean divide between body and soul and earth and heaven, because in Jesus we see that flesh and spirit are revealed as one. In this model the church is a place of God's revelation and work, but it does not assume that God cannot act in other places, even through the mechanisms of government. When Jesus responds to this trick question posed to him by saying, "Whose head is on the coin?" he is answering with a trick question of his own. Of course, it is the emperor on the coin, but the emperor, like everyone else, has been created in the image of God. It is God's image on the coin and because everyone and everything belongs to God, God cares deeply about the affairs of the church, the state, and every fiber of human life. Because everything belongs to God, the church can engage the state, encouraging the state where it is doing good, where it is helping the flourishing of human life and all of creation, where it works for the well-being and dignity of its citizens, yet never sacrifices the well-being and dignity of citizens from other places. In this model Christians cherish the opportunity to vote, because voting means having one's voice heard, and taking part in a conversation that matters and that helps the ordering of our life together. In this model Christians may well live out their discipleship through holding public office, serving in the military, teaching in public schools, delivering the mail, or building interstates, so long as the cross is never confused with the flag, and the flag is never allowed to cover the cross.

The church can applaud and help when the state cares for those who are especially close to God's heart, the poor and the orphan, the weak and the stranger, the elderly, the broken-hearted, and those in prison. And because the church does not cede the realm of human life to the hands of government alone, it can offer a critique of any policy that shapes our common life, sometimes gentle, and sometimes fierce. And because the church has its own story to tell, it never sees one political platform, or any elected official, as the embodiment of the kingdom, and when the government talks too much about rights and personal responsibility, the church responds with the language of gifts, community, and grace, and when the government sees enemies as those to be defeated and destroyed, the church counters with Jesus' command to love friend and enemy alike. When the church engages Caesar, the church has no desire to Christianize the state because history shows that when the church gets too cozy with

government, the church loses its own voice and government does what it wills under the banner of divine blessing.

In this model Christians neither avoid the state, nor trust it, seeing the state for what it is, a broken tradition of human interaction that sometimes gets it right, often gets it wrong, and is susceptible to the same sirens of power, pride, and deception as the rest of us.

What is the answer to that student's penetrating question: How can we be faithful members of Christ's church and serve the country well? We answer it like she did, with the witness of our lives, by staying close to Jesus who in his incarnation brought together all of heaven and all of earth as one kingdom, so we never forget that every nation stands under God, that all people are made in his image, held in his love, and blessed with his grace. We stay close to Jesus who in his life reached out with compassion to those the Roman government discarded, and who gathers a community of friends called the church through whom he continues to seek and save. We stay close to his cross, to remind us that though we may love and serve home and flag, our worship and allegiance belongs to Christ alone. And we stay close to his resurrection, because forgiveness is the way we are freed from the past, and eternal life is the final promise of our future.

This is how we answer that student's earnest and most significant question, we stay close to Jesus. That is always the church's answer.

Amen.