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First Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 22:15-22

### **“Living as Reformed Christians”**

It’s been a sad week in our country. From two black people murdered at a Kentucky Kroger, to pipe bombs mails to current and former elected officials, to the shooting yesterday at Tree of Life Synagogue, when will the hate end? And now, here we are in the aftermath yet again and the finger pointing continues – at Trump, at the Democrats, “we need stricter gun laws”, “more people need to be carrying guns”, no one is to blame, while everyone is to blame.

People sometimes wonder when will civility come back. When will the strident language come to an end, or the vilifying and demonizing people who claim a different political party come to an end? Tolerance for political and religious differences used to be a non-negotiable part of the social contract of the United States, but you wouldn’t know that now. The truth is, we’ve lost a sense of civility—of holding our own views with humility, of recognizing that others hold opposite views and they may have good reason for holding their views. We’ve forgotten how to have thoughtful, respectful discussions and dialogue. We share our thoughts on social media without thinking about how our message affects others. Rather than winning them over, we push them away....

Friends, as Christians, we can – and must – do better. We are called, as Christians, no matter what political party we claim, to build bridge across the deep divide that plagues our country; to see purple in a country of red states and blue states; and to serve as Christ’s ambassadors of reconciliation.

Now I realize there’s a lot of trepidation about talking about politics in church. No one wants the preacher to say that this or that position is God’s position or to tell them who to vote for. I would never presume to think my role is to tell you who to vote for. But it is my role to get us to not only think about how we witness to the peace, love, and justice Christ embodied, but to do it. And I do see my role as one that helps us to practice our politics in such a way that we keep the faith—that is, that we act as Christians as we are doing politics.

Because our faith should inform our politics. This is basic reformed theology 101. John Calvin would roll over in his grave if he thought Presbyterians were saying anything to the contrary. This does not mean, though, that the intersection of faith and politics is the same thing as the intersection of church and state. They are two different things that people often get confused.

So, a bit of a history lesson, but an important one – to begin this morning. The Constitution of the United States provides, at the federal level, that religion and government will be separate. America was not founded as a Christian nation. That is a myth. The framers of the Constitution were well aware of the power of religion to split a nation apart. America's early colonists came from Europe, which had known religious conflict for centuries. But before the constitution was adopted, some colonies did impose a tax that supported one Christian denomination or another, regardless of the tax payer's faith. In Virginia though, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson led the effort to abolish taxes that supported religion. The Founders knew how much blood had been shed by governments in the name of religion, and how governments, in the name of religion, could persecute, imprison, and execute their own citizens. They wanted none of it; they wanted something new.

The tradition, of course, was state-supported religion. Many people thought religion couldn't exist without the financial support of the government, and many thought the state couldn't exist with the moral and spiritual support of the church. So they proposed the very radical idea of freedom of religion.

And here's where I always like to remind people that Presbyterians were deeply involved in that cause. In January of 1776, the Rev. John Rodgers, pastor of the Presbyterian Church on Wall Street, preached a fiery sermon in which he exhorted the young men in his congregation to be brave and to fight for their freedom. And when the Declaration of Independence was signed, the only clergyperson to sign it, himself a member of Congress, was John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister and President of the College of New Jersey, later Princeton.

When they gathered a few years later to write the Constitution, they did something no country had yet done: they separated the church from the state, or the state from the church. There would be no religious litmus test for holding public office. The government would not establish religion, nor would it interfere

with the right of people to practice their faiths freely. Nothing could prevent religious people from participating in the affairs of politics. And there would be tolerance, acceptance of different religions, and a respect for religious diversity that to this day is a marvel to behold and should be upheld by all.

So that's the separation of church and state in a nutshell, and we've been holding them in tension ever since.

But separating church and state is not the same as the intersection of faith and politics. Separating the church and state is about keeping two institutional structures separate. But faith and politics? Those aren't institutions or structures. They are worldviews, lenses through which we look at the world, and they cannot possibly remain separate.

And – they never have been. Christianity has always been a political religion. Think about it, the person we claim as savior was executed by the government for the things he taught his followers to do. We often forget that today because our brand of Christianity has been so thoroughly sanitized over the years. It would never occur to us that we could be executed or persecuted for our beliefs. In fact, Christianity is still the majority religion and in some parts of the country, it's still seen as beneficial to be a Christian. Of course, when the Roman government finally co-opted Christianity as its own in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the persecutions, for the most part, went by the wayside, because now it was legal to be a Christian and socially acceptable. And, in some respects, that begin the slide into putting the state above our religion, and completing ignoring the fact that no matter what party we claim, our faith should challenge our politics rather than simply support them and whatever party platform we claim.

Before the 4<sup>th</sup> century Christians were persecuted because they claimed Jesus was Lord instead of Caesar. We don't think about it because we don't have to, or we don't want to, but saying "Jesus is Lord", which – by the way – everyone in here has said if you've joined the church – is a political statement to make. To say that Jesus is Lord is to echo one of the earliest and most basic Christian confessions. Lordship language came right out of the Roman culture: Caesar claimed for himself the titles "son of God" and "Lord". So for those early followers to claim Jesus as Lord was a slap in the face to the powerful Roman Empire.

It's what's at the heart of today's story from Matthew. Who are you going to claim allegiance to, they wanted to know from Jesus, Caesar or God? The question they ask about taxes is just a red herring; and Jesus knows it. The real question is to whom are you going to give your allegiance? Rome, or God?

A little bit of background on the story: Jews in the 1<sup>st</sup> century paid all sorts of taxes: temple taxes, land taxes, and customs taxes, just to name 3. But the particular tax in question in our story was an imperial tax that supported Rome and the Roman occupation of Israel. In other words, Jews had to pay their oppressors to oppress them. You can imagine how well that went over.

But not everyone saw it as a bad thing. Some people – the Herodians from our story -- supported paying the tax – because they allied themselves with Rome. And others, the Pharisees, opposed the tax because it required them to use a special coin that proclaimed Caesar was Lord, and using that coin was a violation of the first two commandments.

So when they ask Jesus if it's lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not, the Pharisees hope he'll say yes so they can prove to the Jewish people that he's a Roman sympathizer, which will make the Jews turn against him. And the Herodians, the Roman sympathizers, want him to oppose paying the tax to Caesar so they can accuse him of treason.

What Jesus answers, of course, is as compelling today as it was then. "Render unto Cesar what is Caesar's. But give to God what is God's."

What belongs to God? Friends, everything is God's. Everything belongs to God. It's one of our core beliefs. "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." Our lives, our heart and mind and soul and strength, even the money in our pocket, belongs to God.

At the very heart of religious faith is a deep and profound commitment that exceeds all other commitments. For Christians, it is a commitment and promise to proclaim allegiance to the God we see in Christ. That is what it means to proclaim Jesus as Lord. To claim Jesus as Lord is to claim allegiance to the way of Jesus: the way of forgiveness, grace, peace, and compassion, as opposed to the way of the empire: the way of retribution, greed, and rule by force. When we claim Jesus as

Lord we are saying that our first commitment is to follow Jesus and embody his teachings, and everything else in our lives is secondary, including our politics.

Now, please don't get me wrong: to confess Jesus as Lord does not mean that Jesus is the only way a person can experience or know God. But, for those of us who call ourselves Christians, we are saying that for us, we are committed to the ways of Jesus, which means we will work for peace and justice, we will care for the poor and vulnerable, we will work to care for God's creation, and we will see the image of God in everyone we meet.

And if doing all that doesn't sound political to you, then I don't know what does.

The issue isn't whether our faith should inform our politics, but how. You cannot be a person of faith and keep that faith out of your politics, because to be a person of faith means to ascribe to a worldview that instructs and guides you on how to behave in the world – and how you think others should behave, too – and that inevitably will inform how you vote. At their core, religion and politics seek to address how we behave in the world – both as a country and as citizens. Now, we may disagree on how to legislate that behavior – claiming a preference for one party over another – but at their core, religion and politics seek to address our human life together.

But our faith should always come first. It's our faith that informs our politics; not our politics informing our faith. Our allegiance is to God first; Caesar always comes second. Before we are Democrats or Republicans, Independents or Libertarians, we're Christians, and as such we're called to look critically at our politics through the lens of our faith and allow our faith to challenge our political views. We should never take it as a given that our politics will align perfectly with our faith, because they won't. Neither political party is perfect, and neither is more Christian than another.

Friends, if you learn nothing else today, I hope you've learned that the separation of church and state which is something we should all value and uphold, does not require us to banish our moral and religious values from the public square. In fact, I would argue that America's social fabric depends on such values and vision to shape our politics. Can you imagine how different things would look if all Christians who confessed Jesus as Lord were committed more to the common good than they were their political party?

At its best, faith in God has been used to hold the nation to divine accountability, as in Lincoln's expressions of collective penitence and the need for national forgiveness after the Civil War, or when MLK called his country to its best religious and political ideals in his Letter from the Birmingham Jail. At its worst, biblical proof texting to support ideological causes has made both religion and politics look bad. "Are we on God's side" has always been a better question than "Is God on ours"? Religion has and always will be a part of our American politics. So the real question is not *whether* our faith informs our politics, but *how*. In light of everything that has transpired this week, what would Jesus do?

Amen.

*Prayer:*

*Sovereign God, enable this church to do your will. Make it vulnerable that it may walk with others in humility Make it outward looking that it may care deeply for our world. Make it a community that embraces social responsibility. Make it compassionate that it may reveal your Spirit. Make your church whole that it may live in simplicity. Enable this church to do you will. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

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