

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
October 18, 2020
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Isaiah 45:1-7
Psalm 96: 1-9 [10-13]
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

God and Government

Last month, I marked an anniversary: not my birthday, nor my marriage, but the date that I swore an oath to defend the US Constitution, entered federal employment, and became a public servant, 35 years ago. My entire working adulthood, about three-fifths of my life. Longer than my marriage—even longer than I've been a baptized Christian. By the time of my baptism, at age 33, I'd already completed 10 years of federal service. At this point, I have quite a collection of little lapel pins. And I'm not alone here—I know we have other active feds, retirees, and military veterans in our congregation.

So I suspect that we come at today's Gospel lesson with a different frame of reference than what might be found in a less federal part of the country, where we might hear a lot of government-bashing and complaint. Our region's large population of civil servants takes a more positive attitude toward government, for the most part, because we know the people who keep government services running. I know that I bristle a little at one common interpretation of this passage from Matthew, because that interpretation seems to set God and the emperor—used as a proxy for any government—in opposition. So I'd like to drill down a little deeper on a couple of points.

First, note that Jesus doesn't say anything negative about the emperor. It's the Pharisees and the Herodians, trying to trap Jesus in a criminal statement tantamount to treason, who pose the question about paying taxes in a way that implies opposition between God and the Roman empire. And there's certainly a degree of hypocrisy and irony in their approach, given that the Herodians are aligned with King Herod, a client king of the Roman empire, and the Pharisees, purportedly so scrupulous about obeying Jewish law, are violating it to set a snare for a man whom they ought to recognize as the promised Messiah.

A second point that seems clear to me is that Jesus moves beyond their narrow trick question to make a broader statement about religious faith and civil authority: that we should give certain things to each. In addition, Jesus doesn't tell us what things belong to God and what to the earthly authorities, aside from the coin to pay the tax. It seems that he leaves it to us to determine what the other things are.

Third, when we consider this question, we need to remember that we're focusing on things that each one of us, as an individual human being, can give to God or to government: things that are within our power and abilities.

I propose to you that we can use our three-legged stool of Scripture, tradition, and reason to make that determination. Drawing on these familiar resources, I want to share my initial thinking about God and government, about the things that we can and should give to each.

So, what ought we to give to God? “Everything” would be strictly correct but essentially a cop-out. Why don’t we start with today’s Psalm, which gives us a helpful list of ideas? It says that we need to give God glory, honor, worship, praise, and blessing. To that list, drawing on language from the Book of Common Prayer, I’d add adoration, respect, thanksgiving, faith, trust, and obedience. Granted, some of these appear synonymous or at least overlapping, but for me each of these words has nuances that differentiate it from the others. Adoration, glory, honor, and respect denote different levels of reverence toward God; none of them is ever inappropriate as an attitude toward God, but one might feel more right than others in a particular circumstance. Praise and thanksgiving aren’t exactly the same thought; I praise God for all that God is and all that God has created, and I thank God for blessings in my own life. I see faith as belief in God, while trust is more like confidence in God’s love and promise of salvation. And for me, the remaining words are best formulated as verbs, actions that I take: to bless, to worship, and to obey. You probably have other words in mind when you think of what you ought to give to God. And that’s entirely appropriate, because, as individuals in relationship with God, we naturally find that relationship, like any other, going through phases and changes, times of closeness and distance, periods of heightened fervor and of diminished ardor.

Now, let’s turn to our relationship with government or civil authority. I want to point out that, when I ponder this question, I tend to conflate country and government. Because we have a representative system of government in which we elect our leaders at all levels, I see much less difference between country and government than when I look at some other systems of authority in which the government might not at all represent the will of the citizens. The other point I want to stress now is that, because we are Christians, because we put God first in our lives, our relationship with government to some extent stems from and reflects our relationship with God—the latter informs and guides the former.

To start again from our Gospel reading—yes, we owe taxes. I’m not about to get into the merits and downsides of our current tax laws—no way. But in general, I see taxes not just as an obligation to the government, but as part of the obedience I owe to God, particularly in response to the command to love my neighbors. We say that we are Christ’s hands and feet on earth, but we can’t possibly provide all care for even the closest of our neighbors who face poverty, age, illness, disability, or many other needs. One of the jobs that we have assigned to our government is to provide such care for the most vulnerable of our neighbors, and taxes are the key way that each of us contributes to that effort.

But we owe more contributions than just taxes. We ought to participate in governance, to be civically engaged citizens. At the very least, we ought to vote. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, “It is a Christian obligation to vote” and has called on the church to enable all members of all congregations to participate in the coming election. And although this election may be one of the most important we’ll ever see, we ought to strive to vote in every election, at every level. Even better, we should take the time to educate ourselves about candidates and issues on the ballot each time we vote, so that we can vote faithfully and responsibly.

Other levels of civic engagement are a matter of call, I think, in the sense of vocation. Not all of us need to become more involved, but I submit that we ought to consider the possibility and pray

about it. As I mentioned before, I've spent 35 years in public service, trying as hard as I can to improve the security of our country and citizens, but I know that elective office isn't for me. For our consideration, however, there are boards, panels, commissions, community meetings at all levels of government, myriad ways in which each of us might contribute to good governance.

We ought to approach our government with open minds and a presumption of good intent—but we also should bring along scrutiny and a demand for accountability. We can question officials, petition organizations, demand explanations. We can march peacefully in protest of policies and decisions that we think are wrong.

We owe obedience to the government and law: as expressed in our Articles of Religion established in 1801, “we hold it to be the duty of all...who are professors of the Gospel, to pay respectful obedience to the Civil Authority.” Similarly, we owe our nation allegiance and loyalty—but with that comes a right, even an obligation, to examine legislation and policy in the light of our values, our moral code, our personal ethics, and our faith. We should hold our leaders, institutions, and nation to the highest standards.

Finally, we owe our government the grace of our prayers, asking God's help and guidance for our leaders and institutions. Various forms of the Prayers of the People call on us to pray for leaders around the world, for our own government, sometimes for individual government posts in our country, state, and community—even calling out the officeholders by name. The BCP has other relevant prayers, including about four pages of Prayers for National Life. If you feel moved in this direction, Forward Movement and the Episcopal Church Office of Government Relations—yes, that's a thing!—are calling Episcopalians and all others to join in *A Season of Prayer: For an Election*, a nine-day novena of devotional prayers starting on October 27, asking God for discernment in voting and for the well-being of our country. What better opportunity could we get to do as Jesus tells us today, to give both to God and to government? Amen.