

“Empire and Community”

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1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

[Jesus] said to them,

“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Matthew 22:21

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to really see the challenges before us as Christians and as Americans.

May we be brave enough to engage in conversation with people
we disagree with – not simply to convince them, but to listen to them.

May we find common ground between people of different opinions
and as people of goodwill, may we find our differences to be an advantage.

Amen

So, where do we draw that line these days between
what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God?

Just what is meant by that in the first place?

And how should we compare that comparison in our time?

For example, where do any of us draw the line between society and religion?

Or between civic responsibility and personal welfare?

Where do we draw the line between career and family?

Where do we draw the line between financial gain and fair practice?

Where do we draw the line between paying taxes and patriotism?

Where do we draw the line between a job and a safe environment?

Sadly, we are often placed in the midst of dueling dualities –

either for or against, with very little wiggle room for the middle of the road.

‘You are with us or against us’ the Pharisees seem to say’

Yet Jesus is onto their schemes, and minces no words,

when he answers their question about whether or not

faithful Judeans should pay taxes to their Roman oppressors.

Jesus gives them a “both/and” answer:

Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – though it still all belongs to God.

Perhaps it has been your experience these days where people try to pin you down
into some category – ‘You are with us or against us.’

That works pretty good if someone wants to box you up and dismiss you and
your arguments from further discussion – and perhaps you do the same...

Don’t we all know we can’t prove something to somebody who has firmly held beliefs
by using facts alone – and isn’t that true for any of us.

The sad thing is that any attempts at honest debate often lead to counterstrikes
of ‘alternative facts’, accusations of ‘fake news’, and a well-rehearsed narrative.

Coercion is a ‘Lose-Lose’ option, too, and – short of brainwashing or a catastrophe,
it’s just not possible to force somebody to change their beliefs.

Willard, p.2

The only way ahead is when you get to know somebody
who is directly affected by an injustice – whatever, that situation may be,
and they become someone you care about,
and you care enough to become involved to make a change...

Relationship is the building block of ‘community unity’ –
to borrow a phrase from the Wildwood pastors ecumenical project.
In religious terms, having a ‘personal *relationship*’ with God through Christ
is an important part of our tradition.

Relationship is evident in the Apostles Creed, where God is described as a Trinity –
a holy community of Three Persons.

Say it along with me, if you know it..

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.*

*On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostles%27_Creed

Now, the third part of the Creed – beginning with ‘I believe in the Holy Spirit’,
describes our part in relationship with this holy ‘beloved community’
that is generated by this spirit of love, including:

The ‘holy catholic [or “universal”] Church, the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins’ as well as ‘the resurrection of the body,
and the life-everlasting’.

The Apostles Creed – which comes from the earliest statements of faith,
and the more detailed Nicene Creed from the mid 4th Century CE,
were intended as a ‘test of faith’ to help define Christianity
over and against heretical groups and their beliefs.

The United Church of Christ departs from traditional church practices in this way,
by taking the stand that we are covenantal and not creedal –
we don’t require ‘tests of faith’,
but we ‘covenant together’ for a consensus as members of the Church.

Willard, p.3

So, these creeds were introduced to get Christians on the same page, so to speak, about faith and practice, especially when the 'Catholic' Church became adopted by the Roman Empire in the late 4th Century CE as a state religion and... as the *only* official form of Christianity.

Gnosticism and other groups considered to be heretical, were suppressed and their writings destroyed – except for the Nag Hammadi library that had been hidden for a thousand years, buried in jars.

These books include various 'gospels' that didn't make the cut to be accepted as part of the Biblical New Testament.

For about 300 years, the Christians' relationship with the Romans would be periodically scarred by sanctioned violence.

Right before Emperor Constantine would finally advocate and favor Christians, at the close of the 3rd Century CE, Roman Emperor Diocletian brutally antagonized all forms of Christianity.

The first, major persecution, however, was in 64 CE, when it was believed Emperor Nero conspired to burn a large part of Rome – so that he could rebuild it according to his design.

Christians were already suspect among the Roman people;

So, they became a convenient scapegoat whom Nero could blame – and divert attention from himself.

Among those who were martyred at this time were the apostles Peter and Paul – both principal leaders of the early Church.

Since eyewitnesses and storytellers about Jesus were being killed off, it was important to supplement the letters of Paul and others, with the stories of Jesus' words and deeds, to preserve the portrait he represented of a nonviolent God as 'gospels' or 'good news'.

It is believed that the Gospel of Mark was written for this purpose, sometime after the persecutions by Nero, between 64-70 CE.

Matthew and Luke followed about 20 years later, and John by 100 CE.

They needed to preserve the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth through whom a new representation of the God of Israel was presented.

The Gospel stories give us a picture of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ – whom we believe to be the Messiah of the Jewish tradition, showing him to be heroic, but not in the usual sense of a violent avenger.

He duels with the archfiend Satan in the desert – and prevails with his words.

He drives out the 'Legion' of demons from a man – with his words.

Even in Revelation 19, he defeats his enemies with 'the sword of his mouth' – which could mean reasonable debate, even to transform enemies into allies.

As God's Son, Jesus portrays God as a God of justice and peace, wise and loving, forgiving and healing.

Willard, p.4

One of the most important legacies of Jesus for us –
being played out now in our time, was how he was an advocate of women.
We are coming to the realization that women's issues are really human issues
and Jesus was all about 'binding up the strong man'
in whatever form institutional evil might take.
These days, the women of the 'Me, too' movement,
are calling for men to step up as allies, to help bind up male chauvinism.
So, Jesus' message is 'still speaking' to us and to the challenges of our time.

This brings us back to the question of rendering to society
what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.

Right now, the military industrial Empire –
that America has arguably inherited from Rome,
is pitted against its own traditional human Community.

Our society is poisoned by a culture of violence perpetuated
by scapegoating and the abuse of white privilege.

White, black, brown, yellow, red, gender-specific, religious and ethnic people –
we are stuck here and have no other place to go,
because all the nations seems to be struggling
with their own form of 'spurious nationalism'.

We have to engage one another with the 'sword of [our] mouth[s]'
to enter debate – and listen, too;
to exercise the 'sword' of our voice and our God-given right to vote.

For us as Christians, we are to show how Jesus' story provides us
with an example for a third alternative besides 'fight or flight'.

If we can agree on the problem – and problems at hand,
then we can effectively begin debate about the solutions
each of us can bring to the table.

Last week, I gave a prayer for a political gathering
and I put it together in such a way as to be offered with any group present.
Just so you know, I characterized this as me praying to God through Christ,
and inviting everyone present to be in fellowship,
In this way, I hoped not to exclude those people of another faith or even no faith,
yet as people of goodwill:

Willard, p.5

O God, hear my prayer...

Thank you for this evening's festive gathering... as we celebrate common goals...

My hope for those gathered here...

is that they claim their agenda of human rights.

My hope... is that they recognize their agenda must be

in concert with values expressed during the Women's March last January –

that women's issues are human issues;

and in concert with the values of the Civil Rights Movement of an earlier time

that sought to build up a “beloved community”

as a fulfilment of the “American Dream”.

My hope...is that they recognize their agenda

is in concert with that of Progressive Christianity:

that they continue to care for the hungry & thirsty – especially, children

and specifically, their education and life opportunities;

that they continue to care for the stranger –

the immigrant, the refugee, whoever is the minority in our midst;

that they continue to care for the naked – the homeless, the disenfranchised,

and all who are oppressed by human trafficking;

that they continue to care for the sick – those who have no health care,

those who are at risk in lands poisoned by pollution,

and all of us who are threatened by climate change;

that they continue to care for the prisoner –

especially to reinstate voting rights,

but that they also continue to care for those who have been victimized –

especially by gun violence, domestic abuse, and addiction;

that they continue to care for black lives against fear, deception, and hatred,

to preserve freedom and justice for the sake of *all* lives –

a Beloved Community – always now, and yet to be.

as *I pray* in Jesus' name in fellowship with all people of goodwill...

In this way we render the things of Caesar back to God.

Amen

*Our lesson today is from 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 using the Common English Version,
and this letter, is believed to be the first such 'epistle'
written by the Apostle Paul, to serve as guidance for the early Church...*

¹From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.

To the Thessalonians' church that is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Grace and peace to all of you.

²We always thank God for all of you
when we mention you constantly in our prayers.

³This is because we remember
your work that comes from faith,
your effort that comes from love, and
your perseverance that comes from hope
in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and [Abba] Father.

⁴Brothers and sisters, you are loved by God,
and we know that [God] has chosen you.

⁵We know this because our good news didn't come to you just in speech
but also with power and the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

You know as well as we do what kind of people we were
when we were with you, which was for your sake.

⁶You became imitators of us and of the Lord when you accepted the message
that came from the Holy Spirit with joy in spite of great suffering.

⁷As a result you became an example to all the believers
in Macedonia [Mas-uh-do'-nia] and Achaia [A-kay'-a].

⁸The message about the Lord rang out from you,
not only in Macedonia and Achaia but in every place.

The news about your faithfulness to God has spread
so that we don't even need to mention it.

⁹People tell us about what sort of welcome we had from you
and how you turned to God from idols.

As a result, you are serving the living and true God,
¹⁰and you are waiting for [God's] Son from heaven.

[God's] Son is Jesus, who is the one [God] raised from the dead
and who is the one who will rescue us from the coming wrath.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and took counsel how to entangle him in his talk.

¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Hero'di-ans, saying,
“Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully,
and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men.

¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said,

“Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?

¹⁹ Show me the money for the tax.”

And they brought him a coin.

²⁰ And Jesus said to them,

“Whose likeness and inscription is this?”

²¹ They said,

“Caesar’s.”

Then [Jesus] said to them,

“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,
and to God the things that are God’s.”

²² When they heard it, they marveled; and they left him and went away.