
Pledging Allegiance

Matthew 22:15-22

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, October 22, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

The gospel lesson for today really presents some topics that we are told should never be discussed in public or at least with extended family members during the holidays—money, politics, and religion. But it's unavoidable. Jesus has a way of confronting us at our core. We can run but we can't hide this morning in our wooden pew or chair. Jesus doesn't shy away from controversy or crises; he comes with calm in the midst of challenging storms. Even while under the controlling gaze of Roman imperialism, he's not afraid, not afraid to speak the truth and nothing but the truth. That shouldn't be surprising because he is the truth. And when the truth speaks, we better listen.

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.” Or as the King James version says, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.” On the surface, it would appear that the emperor and God are on equal footing, that is, that in some way they have the same priority. Give to the emperor his things and give to God what is God's. Plain and simple, isn't it? Not really.

The coin brought to Jesus is a silver Roman *denarius* depicting the emperor's image (his head) and bearing the inscription “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Deified Augustus, [who also is] Augustus.” On the reverse side of the coin, it declares Tiberius is “high priest,” making the assertion that the emperor is divinity, is Lord, is the holy mediator of the Roman state religion. As you can imagine, this coin was blasphemous from the view of Jewish monotheism; many Jews rejected and resented it. But a rejection of the coin, the mighty dollar, was viewed as a rejection of the emperor and the Roman empire overall. To use the coin was an act of economic enthronement of Caesar, the emperor, as Lord. Thus, economy was linked to religiosity and the perpetuation of imperial civic religion.

Those of you who are Baptists might be familiar with what is called ‘the love offering’ collected in congregations for guest preachers. When the offering is collected, if there isn't enough love shown, the offering plates are sent around again! ‘Love’ is used to grow the economy! Believe me—there's a link between economy and religious practice. Just read the stellar book of my divinity colleague, Kate Bowler, *Blessed: The History of the American Prosperity Gospel*.

Money, politics, and religion are interweaved and were interwoven in an ancient imperial web and a refusal to bow to this empire caused lots of problems. For early Christians, if Jesus Christ was Lord, this meant that Caesar could not be. Caesar was creature, not Creator, and one cannot serve two masters. What Jesus says reveals the ongoing struggle between competing loyalties. To whom or what do you pledge allegiance? Is it the state, the empire, the emperor, your boss, your coach, or is it God, is it Jesus Christ? Some may not have sold themselves to the devil, but they have sold themselves to the empire and by doing so have enthroned the emperor, presidents, prime ministers and other world leaders in the glow of civic glory, which is its own form of worship. Some bow at the altars of culture or country and subsume and sacrifice the Christ on these, blurring the lines so much so that it's hard to know who or what we are honoring. Confusion comes when one equates

the empire-state, the nation, with the kingdom of God. It's like saying the United States of America is the kingdom of heaven; if this is heaven, I sure don't want to know what hell is like. This country and Christ are not the same and Jesus makes it clear that the emperor, that Caesar, is different from God thus the emperor is not the Lord.

This may be a bit hard to digest when we rely on the nation or empire for comfort and security and protection and pleasure and even hope for a better future. It can be hard when we, even unknowingly, turn an empire into a god.

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." "The things that are God's." Well, everything is God's, even what is the emperor's! It all belongs to God. God overshadows the rights and allegiances any empire might demand for itself. God determines what is Caesar's and what is not. God is sovereign over the state.

Jesus asks, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" The head of the emperor can be captured on a coin held in human hands, whereas we sing, "God's got the whole world in his hands." This earthly Roman lord can be contained on a piece of metal, a coin, whereas the heavenly Lord, Jesus Christ, cannot be contained even by the highest heaven (2 Chron 6:18). There is no graven image of God that can encapsulate the totality of God and we definitely can't hold God in our feeble hands. Rather, God holds us, his precious jewels made in his image.

Beginning with the early church father, Tertullian, many have identified "the things that are God's" with human beings. If coins with Caesar's image and inscription belong to Caesar, then human beings created in God's image, as we see in Genesis, belong entirely to God. Give to God the things that are God's. Give yourself to God. We are God's and Jesus calls his hearers to a higher fidelity, transcending adherence to any imperial law or figure. He calls us to look beyond an image on any coin to whose image is on every human being. We can get lost in a market-driven life and political power plays and align ourselves to the empire, and forget in whose image we have been created. When we do that, we give ourselves over to the emperor rather than God. But if we remember God's words, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness," we will remember that we belong to God and should offer ourselves to God. Our deepest self is God's for the imprint of God's image is on us. As one seminary professor writes, "We may divide our budget, but we must never divide our allegiance" (Lance Pape).

How can we pledge allegiance to the empire and to God? And why would we anyway? Notice that it's the Pharisees, their disciples, and the Herodians (think King Herod's groupies), who try to entrap Jesus. The religious and civic authorities collude against Jesus. When Jesus points us to the things that are God, he moves our theological and social imagination to a higher plane to remind us that state and religious leaders can be agents of injustice and even evil. He gestures beyond humanity and human leadership or governance because institutional religious bodies, the church, and government do not necessarily always remind us that we belong to God because they want us to belong to them—our time, our energy, our gifts, our taxes, our everything. But you don't belong to Duke and you don't belong to Duke Chapel and you don't belong to the Congregation at Duke Chapel. You belong to God!

What Jesus knew and what Jesus knows is that allegiance to God will also sometimes mean resistance to civic and religious authorities because the earthly empire is not the heavenly kingdom of God. Sometimes following Jesus means you might have to resist the church which has lost its

way. During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was imprisoned and in his “Letter from the Birmingham jail,” he writes, “I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen...[Some in the church] have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows....In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: ‘Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concerns.’ And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.... [King continues] I have wept over the laxity of the church.... I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists...So often the church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church’s silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are.”

King reveals that following Jesus is not necessarily the same thing as following the church. I say this because the Pharisees and their disciples, the religious folk, the church members, along with the empire-state, the Herodians, are both complicit in putting Jesus to death. They not only test Jesus but eventually torture him. In the end, the religious and civic bodies conspire against Jesus as he obeys the will of God. There’s sociopolitical and religious wrath against Jesus; he knows this is the reality of the empire that has subsumed politics and religion under its powerful oppressive regime. Jesus learns that the empire will strike back.

The movie *Romero* is based on the true story of Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador who resisted the civic, religious, and military powers that oppressed and tortured the poor. At one point, Romero is put in prison along with one of his colleagues. As he stands in his prison cell, exhausted, drenched in sweat and despair, he begins to hear his friend scream with terror as he’s tortured by his captors. In that moment, Romero yells out from his cell, “We’re human beings! We’re human beings!” The empire doesn’t see us as human beings but as commodities, tools for production, not as people made in the image of God. And this becomes even clearer when in 1980, Archbishop Romero is assassinated while presiding at the Eucharist. The empire will strike back.

Emperors and the empire don’t save, have never saved, will never save, and in the end, if you bow to it, if you give yourself to it, it will still eventually kill you, just like it did Jesus. So, let’s put an end to the fake news that declares the emperor is God, and the empire-state, the nation, and the kingdom of God are synonymous. Let’s put an end to the fake news that equates patriotism and love of country with being a Christian and loving God, even though being an American is not the same thing as being a Christian. Let’s put an end to the fake news that the worship of the American flag is the same thing as the worship of God. Let’s put an end to the fake news that certain physical symbols, though historical, powerful, and meaningful, are more important than real human lives today.

And let’s start spreading the faith news. The faith news that there is one Gospel, one Lord, one Savior, and it’s not Caesar, and it’s not Rome, it’s not any one country or nation, but it is the Lord

Jesus Christ. Countries and states will let you down. Churches and denominations will let you down, but they are not the Lord. Jesus is. “Only trust him, only trust him, only trust him now.”

I pledge allegiance today. I take a knee at the altar of eternity around the table for the marriage supper of the Lamb. I don’t need any coins to buy food or drink because God gives himself to us. His body will feed us. His blood will quench our thirst. I pledge allegiance today. I bow in reverence and in praise to the Lamb of God who was slain.

*I pledge allegiance to the Lamb
With all my strength, with all I am
I will seek to honor His commands
I pledge allegiance to the Lamb. (Ray Boltz)*