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Year A
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EVEN IN AN ELECTION YEAR
MATTHEW 22:15-22

Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar? In this economy? In an election year? What if there is nothing to render, because Wall Street is crumbling? What if I do not have the time or desire to read every page of the Alabama constitution? What if I do not have the energy to protest this state's oppressive tax structure?

Remember someone, somewhere taught you not to discuss religion and politics in polite company. Religion and politics are supposed to be personal; it is better to live in harmony than to offend. Sorry, but I have to ask, "What is the difference between this way of being in the world and suppression?" To whatever extent saying nothing is suppression, fear not: whatever is suppressed will bubble to the surface with or without the help of words, sometimes passively, sometimes aggressively, sometimes both.

Faith and politics go together. Whether we recognize it or not, one informs the other. If faith is truly a way of life---our way of life---it will find its way into our politics. No, everybody's faith is not the same (though the faithful often share a life together in bodies like the church); and being faithful does not lead to political uniformity. Sometimes it seems as if it does; often it feels like it should. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer...

Here in the United States, a funny thing is happening on the way to the election. We, as a nation, are grappling with questions based on the notion of separation of church and state, with the extent to which morality may be legislated, but what is perhaps more interesting is that we are

grappling with the distinction between public and private in ways that we have not since Americans searched for communists beneath the bed.

9.11 changed everything. Fear gripped this nation, and human rights seemed to be reconfigured in the name of national security (I say “seemed to be,” because I do not know if I fully understand what happened, and if I do, and I am unsure that I am qualified to speak on the subject intelligently). I do know that as bombs began falling in Iraq that questions were being asked like: Who has access to what information? And suddenly, American politics felt more up close and personal, not merely exercises in baby-kissing, hand-squeezing and back-slapping.

Now we find ourselves midst a financial crisis that is creating hysteria throughout the nation. The stock market crashed, rallied and crashed again. Who knows what it is doing? Or what it will do? I know this: people are worried. Nobody knows what anything is worth anymore (especially in the real estate market), and those who thought they had made responsible financial decisions in preparation for the future are asking, “Who changed the rules?”

On Friday’s edition of *All Things Considered*, Chris Arnold acknowledged our national desperation by predicting that, “The next president will lead a nation gripped by the worst economic turmoil in generations. But whoever ends up in the White House will also have historic power to reshape the nation’s financial system.” Historic power: How did we end up here? Why is that phrase so frightening? Who is being bailed out? Who will ultimately do the bailing?

Maybe this is not the Lord’s Day to preach the lectionary. Or at least preach from a book that is not as economics-minded as Matthew. Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar? Sure, but consider this: In a democratic society, who is Caesar? You? Me? Our neighbors? If tea-drinking Bostonians had rendered to Caesar what Caesar thought belonged to him back in the eighteenth century, you and I may be singing, “God Save the Queen.”

Now that the republic has a couple of hundred years of history behind it (and hopefully a few more ahead of it), questions about the shape of the democracy persist. To whom are we accountable politically? Is this the same entity to whom we are accountable financially? Which is a greater threat to American freedom: faith or the financial crisis? Would you rather there be a wall of separation between religion and the state or between Wall Street and Washington?

If this series of tough questions is creating stress---if you are feeling squeezed or drained or punched (choose your metaphor)---imagine how Jesus feels as the Pharisees and Herodians lob questions at him. We would know that Jesus is on the defensive even if Matthew did not feel obligated to set up the story by announcing, "Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said." From the beginning, it is clear that Jesus better watch his step, because it is going to get deep.

"Teacher," they say (which is New Testament for the Senator from Illinois or Arizona)... "We know that you are sincere." Translation: Watch out, here comes the dagger! "Teach us the way of God" (as opposed to Rome?) in accordance with the truth (that your body is subject to Roman authority): "Show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality." Show deference to no one, because if you defer to Rome, you will be charged with blasphemy; and if you defer to your Jewish heritage, you will be charged with sedition. Understand?

The phrase "for you do not regard people with partiality" often is overlooked in commentaries on this passage. Or if not overlooked, it is absorbed by the dichotomy between Pharisees and Herodians, between Israel and Rome, between religion and the state. To not regard people with partiality, however, has even greater implications, especially for those of us who feel called to serve in a pluralistic culture, even in an election year.

At the center of the political struggle between what is publicized and what is privatized is nationalism. What belongs to Caesar? Nothing: Oh, Ron, that is so American...and Christian. The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. In life and in death, we belong to God (not Caesar). Look at our

currency. It is stamped by an affirmation of faith: "In God we trust;" but I cannot help but wonder if this statement refers to the God who created heaven and earth or if it is self-referential. In this God we place our national trust (and notice that we have even transposed the language of trust in financial terms). Remember wealth is not the problem. In fact, it is a gift, a tool that God gives to human beings to alleviate suffering: poverty, hunger and injustices. It is in placing one's faith, one's trust, in wealth that is problematic.

Faith is a tightrope that we are called to walk, even if we are afraid of falling. Jesus probably feels suspended in midair when the Pharisees and Herodians ask, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" The IRS leans in to hear what he says, but "Jesus, aware of their malice, says, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?'" Jesus mirrors the anger projected, and let's face it: His anger probably runs deeply as he declares, "Look, you liars (and that, by the way, is what hypocrites do; they lie to themselves and to others)...Look, you liars, this is not a dissertation defense. Show me the coin used for the tax," and they do (even Jesus' critics obey him instinctively). With a denarius in hand, Jesus answers the Pharisees and Herodians question with a question, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" And they say, "Caesar (you know, the one after whom we named the salad dressing)." Then Christ decrees, "Render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God the things that are God's." The Scriptures report that when the Pharisees and Herodians hear this, "They are amazed...they leave him and go away."

Amazed: By whom? We know the answer to that question, but by what? Maybe they are amazed that their question does not entrap him. Maybe they are awed by the truth of his statement. Maybe they know instinctively that nothing belongs to Caesar and that everything belongs to God. Maybe they are amazed by Jesus' impartiality. Impartiality is, in fact, so rare; it is truly amazing to experience. Impartiality feels like unconditional, awe-inspiring love, love that penetrates barriers so that the church and the world may be one.

The Gospel of the Lord may seem unrealistic, especially in an election year, but still, this is God's vision for the world. God is a God of integration. God calls us to a faith that is not compartmentalized and to politics that we would not be embarrassed to hold in the light of Scripture. God calls each and every one of us to live one life deeply, darkly and confidently to God's glory. Along the way, we may render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar remembering that nothing that lasts does. God's love for us is from everlasting to everlasting, and this, as amazing as it is, is the Word of the Lord now and forever. Now to the Ruler of all worlds, undying, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever! Amen.