

Sermon: The Taxing Work of Being a Christian**Scripture: Matthew 22:15****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: October 16, 2011**

How interesting that we have this scripture about taxes laid on us in church for the days in which we find ourselves. Wouldn't it be interesting if we could get a direct word from Jesus about whether the government should be exacting heavier taxes on the wealthiest among us to address our country's current needs or not? Well, I'm here to tell you that this week Jesus did give me a direct word about this issue and Jesus told me to tell you that.... Nah, I'm just kidding. No matter what our perspective is on the current taxation issue and there are probably those of us within this very room who would come down on opposite sides and both be pretty clear that Jesus would agree with us, if our scriptures teach us anything, if Jesus were to be asked, chances are both sides would be surprised and amazed at his response, as the people were in the Gospel story.

It was a significant and painful dilemma for many Jews of the day. They were a people whose land was occupied by the Roman Empire and they were forced to pay taxes to this empire, many of the poorest taxed well beyond their means to pay. But even more problematic was that they not only had to give the occupying empire their money but their loyalty as well, their religious as well as political loyalty. Because Caesar Augustus was not just a king he was the self-proclaimed Son of God, so when you had to pledge your allegiance to Rome you were pledging allegiance to a god as well. That's one reason why it was so scandalous that Jesus and at times the disciples referred to himself as the Son of God. So when you carried Roman money around to buy what you needed you were carrying money with the Emperor's face on it and the phrase "Son of God" emblazoned on the coin as well. This was hugely problematic to devout Jews not only because their allegiance was owed to God and none other but also because they were not have or hold any graven images. So even having a coin in the first place was troublesome, much less using it regularly. But then again they did have their everyday live to contend with and that was the currency for the exchanges going on in the Roman Empire.

There were some Jews who resisted Rome. They were called the zealots and many of them would have found a way to avoid using Roman money altogether. They

would have refused to pay taxes to Caesar as an act of civil disobedience. But if you were caught by the Roman authorities of course then you could get arrested for sedition. So you see the trap that the questioners were putting Jesus in. They said “should we pay taxes to Caesar or not. If Jesus said “no” then he would have been arrested for sedition and if he said “yes” then he would have lost all credibility with the zealots surrounding him. They knew it was a trap because all of them were scandalized by the dilemma themselves and knew no answer would suffice.

But Jesus answers brilliantly by putting the issue right back in their laps. He gives them no answer at all. First he tells the religious leaders that they are a bunch of hypocrites and he asks for one of the coins from them. They look around with guilty smiles and pull one out. Right there and then Jesus has bested them by making the point that they are carrying around a graven image themselves. But then he goes a step further and he asks them to tell him whose image is on the coin. “It’s Caesar’s image”, they respond sheepishly, an image of a god and with the words “the son of god” emblazoned right there. And he says – “hey then, pay your tribute to Caesar. Give to Caesar’s what is his and give to God what is God’s.” Jesus answers the challenge not with an answer but with a complication, by turning the issue back on them and heightening the crisis. In other words Jesus says – this is an issue and a serious one at that and YOU really need to work through and figure out where YOUR loyalty lies and how exactly YOU are going to express that loyalty. Interesting if you turn to Luke 23 verse 2 and hear what the chief priests say to Pilate to get him to condemn Jesus.

And so this passage cannot be read, as it sometimes is, as Jesus advocating for a separation of church and state – that would be an anachronism because there was no such concept at the time – Rome was the kingdom of the gods and Caesar was the head god and they expected not only your political but your religious devotion. For Jesus to say give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and God what is God’s is to leave us asking – isn’t everything God’s so then what do we do with that which is required of us that is not of God. He gives no answer but leaves us in the dilemma to live with it ourselves. And so if anything the challenge of this scripture for us today, I would say, is for a people of faith to remember that our political commitments should be informed by our faith commitment because it is all God’s world.

Our dilemma today, though, is not completely dissimilar to the Jewish dilemma in Jesus' day. We are still struggling aren't we with the proper role of government in our lives and how we respond to it given that as people of faith that are ultimately loyalty is not to our country but to our God. In our day, there are people on the two extremes, people who see government far from divinely ordained but maybe closer to evil incarnate and believe it needs to be eliminated as much as humanly possible. And then there is the other extreme, those who see government as the answer to all our questions and problems and believe its role should be increased. And then of course there is the vast majority of us who probably fall somewhere in between.

I would suggest that a passage like we have today rather than encouraging us to keep religion and politics separate, pushes us to struggle with how our political commitment and positions on various issues come from our faith commitment and our position as disciples of Christ. There are no easy, hard, fast answers, I would have to say as we can hear at times in the public square completely opposite perspectives being supported by the same faith commitments. But it really isn't all relative. Jesus did leave us some guidance. We should at least be able to agree on some guidelines and principles to which we need to refer to draw our conclusions.

One of those, for instance, comes from Matthew 25:40 when Jesus says to his disciples "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters you did to me." So in our politics we've got to place care and concern for the least of those among us, at the center? So if we are going to vote with the majority of Republicans against the Obama job plan, for instance, as Christians, we are obligated to make the case for why the Job plan hurts the least of those among us. We cannot defend tax breaks for the wealthy unless it's clear that such breaks ultimately benefit not just them but the least of those among us. We cannot call those on government welfare bottom feeders who are lazy and need to work harder for that is counter to our Lord's teachings. Conversely, if we are going to support through our representatives Obama's plan, we've got to make the case for why taxation of the wealthy by the government in the end benefits those at the bottom and doesn't necessarily let those of us of comfortable means off the hook to care for them ourselves. But either way, it's got to be a bottom up argument, holding the concerns of the least of those among us as central to our politics. That's one example of how our faith should inform our politics.

We have to remember that the First Amendment to the Constitution was not originally about protecting the public square and politics from religion but about protecting our religion from the influence of the state so that the state, ideally, could be held to a higher moral standard. Religion was one of the central bulwarks against the encroachment of the state on the rights, liberties and conscience of the individual. We are very much supposed to bring our faith to bear on our politics but we've got to do that in an informed and educated way. There are other guidelines and principles from our faith that should guide our engagement with politics but how much work do we put in to be clear about those, articulating them and then figuring out how they interact with the public square. I would suggest that the religious right has done this and done this effectively and the religious left has abdicated its responsibility to bring its faith to bear on its politics. How much prayer do we put into the issues before forming our political perspectives? How much do we hold policy issues under the light of our understanding of gospel teachings?

I'd like to close with an interesting question from Stephen Carter the author of The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion, because I think it leaves us in a similar unsettled state that Jesus left his listeners in. He asks us to simply consider how often our theology squares with our politics. How neatly does our faith commitment align with our political commitments. If the answer is "very neatly" then he says we've got a problem. Because at that point when all our theology squares neatly with our political party there is reason to suspect "that far from trying to discern God's will and follow it in the world, [we are] first deciding what path to take in the world and then looking for evidence that God agrees." (p. 70)

Democrats where are those issues that because of your faith commitment, you must align yourself with your fellow Republicans? Republicans where are those issues that because of your faith commitment you have to agree with the democrats? Our commitment to God and what is God's has got to be primary and only secondary is our commitment to what is Democrat or Republican or Independent or American. Jesus leaves us having to do the difficult and taxing work of figuring out how best to be a Christian in a nation like ours in days such as these....