



Sermon: Civic Engagement and Blessing of Ballots

Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Pastor Paul Carlson, October 19, 2014

Prayer: God of love, may we be alive to the world that you desire to heal and restore. Amen.

Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that belong to God.

It sounds so simple but, of course, it is not. As I approach the topic that Jesus himself raises, that is, the relationship of the church or religion and the state, I know that it is dangerous terrain. I'm always glad that I am a Lutheran whenever this topic comes up. That is because Luther, writing in the 16th century under a government that was definitely not a democracy, had some very sensible and wise things to say about it.

Luther, following after the writing of St. Paul, says that there are two spheres of governance under which we live. One is internal, that is to say, where Christ rules in the conscience through word and spirit. This is the realm of grace. The other is external. This is the sphere of civil society, where Christ rules through laws, governing authorities and political traditions. These are tied to a political and economic system under which we must live. These are not neat and clear distinctions. The truth is, they overlap all the time and provide us with endless rounds of ambiguity. We live in both realms and Christ rules in both, though in very different ways.

In today's text, we have a Roman coin, a silver denarius, which shows the emperor's image, that is to say, his head. There is an inscription: Tiberius Cesar, son of the deified Augustus. On the other side of the coin Tiberius is declared high priest. The religious leaders, whom Jesus is engaging, happen to have this coin in their possession. It is interesting that they do not have the temple money, but they don't. The coin that they have makes a claim. It says the Emperor is divine and it says that he is the mediator of this Roman state religion. In short, it is, from a Jewish perspective, blasphemy. It looks like the religious leaders made a deal.

They would not be critical of Rome and would cooperate with Roman rule in exchange for the right to run the temple, collect the temple tax, and keep the people in check. The Roman authorities did not like public excitement or rebellion. The religious authorities were effectively stuck. They had given all to the Emperor. Nothing was left for God.

The Kingdom of God is always a challenge to the established order of things. From the beginning the Christian movement, the followers of Christ, had a tense relationship with civil society. When Paul wrote his letters, he counseled Christians to obey the secular authorities. They were, he said, instituted by God to keep good order in society. But when the leader of the government claims to be God there is a problem. The early Christian movement lost many of its leaders because of the tension that existed from the beginning. Jesus, of course, was the first of many martyrs.

We are blessed. We live in a democracy, which is a gift to the church. In the kingdom of God, where Christ reigns in the conscience through Word, Spirit, and grace, we are called to stand with those who are marginalized in society. When we do that, we sometimes find ourselves dealing with the laws and procedures of our governing bodies. Ultimately, our values and our beliefs are rooted in the Gospel and the teachings of Christ. We are grace people, we are forgiving people, we are compassionate people, and we do care for the prisoner, for the sick and all those in need. We do not say to people that they must fend for themselves. We do not judge those who have less or those who are sick or those who go to prison. Rather we reach out to them and offer them Christ's love. If we find that people are being exploited, we speak on their behalf.

But there is an important distinction, so I will once again tell this famous story. A priest in Latin America once said, "when I feed the poor I am considered a saint but when I asked the question why are they poor I am considered a communist." When we give bread to someone who is hungry, we are offering direct service. When we question how the rich and powerful or the civil authorities are responsible for the condition of the poor or the sick, we are engaging in what we call systemic justice. We are ok with direct service. We often struggle with systemic justice issues.

Here is my role. My role is to proclaim the gospel and to be true to the values and teachings of Jesus. The ambiguity of this relationship that we have with civil society is not one that any of us can solve. It is truly a matter of the spirit guiding us.

In a democracy we have the privilege, often shunned, of exercising our right to vote. Historically this is unheard of. We on the other hand have this gift-the right to vote- that is given to us and through which, Luther would say, Christ rules. When we vote we can exercise our Christian values and in so doing effect the good of all in society. Through our vote we can, in a small way or perhaps in a big way, help the lives and well-being of many who live on the margins of society. We can ask candidates questions that will help us determine if they in fact are following the same values that our faith teaches regarding the marginalized of society. I will not as a pastor engage from the pulpit the question of what you should think or how you should apply those values when you vote. The spirit of Christ in us rules our conscience. I do not rule your conscience, obviously. Nor does anyone else rule your conscience. How you choose to live out your call is between you and God. We are called to respect the conscience of each as we struggle in faith to apply our values and our beliefs through this gift of the democratic process.

In a few moments we will have a brief prayer to bless the ballots that will be used to vote in the coming midterm election. It in no way intends to take a stand on candidates or issues. But it is the right thing for us to do in the church to understand God's presence in all aspects of our lives,. There is no biblical injunction that says you must vote. There is no biblical word that says that you should vote a particular way. But if we truly believe that all life is sacred and that the division between secular and the holy is false, then blessing the ballots is acknowledging the holy in all of life.

This is rooted in the grace and love of God. In Christ the heart of God is revealed in the way Jesus treated the marginalized. The heart of God was revealed in the way Jesus dealt with power, religious or civil. And the lesson is that he dealt with it with grace and love and truth. As he asked the leaders to step up and acknowledge the marginalized. When the Rocky Mountain synod encourages us on Facebook to vote it is saying that this, like all acts, is a holy act. It gives me a sense of peace because I want to live into the Gospel in deeper and more inclusive ways. Whether it's a leaf on a tree, an encounter with another human being or in the countless daily tasks that we undertake I would like it if they were shot through with a sense of the holy. I know that's incredibly idealistic and I also know it is impossible to achieve. I also know that it's worth praying for and worth moving towards.

So let us vote our values and our faith, let us pray, and bring that sense of prayer to the decisions we ultimately make and let us give thanks that we are even able to do it. Amen.