

Matthew 22, Isaiah 45, October, 2017 faith and state

Driving around Duluth, as of late, I've noticed some yard signs that say "Participants, not spectators." I have no idea what this is promoting, and actually I don't care, because what caught my attention was the slogan: "participants, not spectators." Quite often in life, we are one or the other, a participant or a spectator, isn't that so? And depending on the occasion, one or the other role may be more appropriate. For example, when we attend concerts, my husband has this annoying habit of singing along under his breath with the performing musician if he happens to know the song. This is bad. People came to hear the performer, not my husband. This is an instance where we are really supposed to be spectators, not participants. Sometimes our job is to sit quietly and take something in. On the other hand, it is also true that in many instances we need to leave behind the passivity of the spectator role and embrace the more interactive and intentional role of a participant. If we all were simply spectators of our fishcake dinner, for example, it would never have happened; it required active participants, not merely spectators. And in our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus lays out two realms for us in which God is involved and we are involved. Church and state, if you like; faith and government; civic and religious; however we might delineate these two. *In both realms, God is active, and we are called by God to be participants, not spectators, in both realms.*

Church and state are a tough pair to navigate between, aren't they? All kinds of thorny issues crop up *within* each realm and *between* the two. A tough marriage to create, if you like. Ironically, I actually knew a couple about a decade ago that were this very marriage; she was a pastor and her husband worked for the IRS. She reported that

both of them tended to find themselves unpopular at certain kinds of gatherings-- she because people feared she would be too heavy-handed in religion; he because people generally dislike and even fear the IRS. Somehow, though, they navigated their way to a successful relationship, and we are called to do the same; to find a way to be faithful and active participants in both civic matters and matters of faith. That's the challenge presented to us in our lessons this morning.

Let's look at this lesson from Matthew 22. We find Jesus here in confrontation with leaders both political and religious. We are told that the Pharisees, who were Jewish religious leaders, and the Herodians, who were a political group in support of King Herod, have come together to see Jesus. We may not realize that this means these two groups are "reaching across the aisle", as we say about our congress on those exceedingly rare occasions when folks attempt to work together with those of other political parties instead of in opposition to one another. That the Pharisees and Herodians are teaming up is at least as surprising as if the Republicans and Democrats were to do so in our day. The Herodians are in bed with their Roman occupiers; they are Jews who have capitalized and made money by fraternizing with the enemy, the Romans. The Pharisees are zealous Jews who are attempting to preserve Jewish culture and separation from others, and they align with the majority of their people, over against Rome. These two groups have opposing agendas. Yet, politics, as we know, makes strange bedfellows, and at this moment, both of these divergent groups share a common enemy: Jesus. With his radical teachings and immense popularity, he threatens the status quo in both directions, so much so that these two groups, normally adversaries, have come together to try and take Jesus out. At this point, they act through words; later they will literally take him out,

through execution. But, we aren't there yet. Right now, they intend to entrap Jesus in a public situation, to embarrass him or vilify him in front of others. They want to discredit Jesus in the public eye. So, these two groups set Jesus up with some insincere flattery and then they spring the trap. They have come up with a clever question for Jesus that they reason is a no-win situation for him. No matter how he answers, he can only lose; he can't win. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?", they ask. If Jesus supports the paying of taxes to the hated Roman emperor whose troops are occupying their country, the people will regard him as a traitor. But, if he responds that the tax should not be paid, he is in conflict with those same Roman occupiers and can be arrested and imprisoned. Either way, his opponents win and Jesus loses. But, Jesus, aware of their malicious intent, confounds them with his answer. He asks to see the coin used to pay the tax—presumably a denari, with the picture and inscription of the emperor upon it. Pointing out that image and inscription, Jesus then declares, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperors and give to God the things that are God's." His answer stumped them; he didn't fall into their trap, and they left, we are told, in amazement. Obviously Jesus' answer would be featured on the nightly news and replayed endlessly online. It was a good sound bite.

But, it was more than just a good sound bite. In these words Jesus lays out for us two very clear principals. He says that the state has a right to expect certain things of us, and that we have a civic duty to the government to participate in civic matters in a responsible and appropriate way. *Participants, not spectators.* That includes, but would not be limited to, paying taxes. His answer is in harmony with the whole of Scripture and most of Christian tradition, where the understanding has been that the government exists

to promote order, security, and the common good for citizens; and citizens have a Godly responsibility to participate in that government appropriately. I'd like to share a few words with you, written by our former National Bishop, Bishop Mark Hanson, on this very subject. He writes:

As a public church called to witness to God's love for all God has created, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) affirms the importance of participation in society by all people, including people of faith. Scripture reveals God's presence in all realms of life, including political life. This church understands government as a means through which God can work to preserve creation and build a more peaceful and just social order in a sinful world. "

In a perfect world, then, government exists to serve God's intention for the welfare of all people and even of the planet. Government is a means through which the common good may be served. But—this won't be breaking news---we don't live in a perfect world. All kinds of governments all around the world behave in ways that clearly are not in accordance with God's will or intent. Because it's a broken world, and all human institutions are sinful and imperfect, open to corruption, greed, and malice. Sometimes it's enough to cause us to despair. But our first lesson from Isaiah raises a very interesting point in this regard. Isaiah is writing for Hebrew people in exile in Babylon in the 500s BC. These are people who have been mere human fodder as they bear the brunt of political fall out. Powerful Babylon had conquered their tiny nation of Judah and brought into exile their most prominent citizens. They have been languishing away from their faith and homeland for decades. But now, a new political development

has arisen. Cyrus, the king of rising-power Persia, is on the warpath and gobbling up neighboring kingdoms in order to expand his own. He will conquer Babylon and release the Hebrew exiles to return back to their homeland. He will do this, not because he's just a really nice guy. Or because he has any kind of faith or knowledge of God. As far we know, none of that was the case. He will do this simply because it is expedient for him. He wants Babylon and has no interest in a small, ragtag group of exiles from a no-account, tiny country like Judah. But Isaiah makes the point that God will work through Cyrus and his doings, even though Cyrus has an entirely different agenda. "I will go before you", God says to Cyrus, "and level the mountains and cut through bars of iron, though you do not know me." Which prompts us to realize that God can work through others—or us—even when we don't intend it, have no interest in it, and are fulfilling an entirely different agenda. It also assures us that God cares about governance and politics and is active within them, even if behind the scenes, as in this case. God is a *participant, not a spectator*, within the civic realm. And that can be reassuring to grasp.

This then, is a way to think about our participation in civic life as Christians and as citizens. We are called to give to the government what is right and appropriate, including taxes, our informed vote, our prayers for wise leadership, volunteering in ways that build up our community, and whatever other kind of participation towards which our faith-shaped values might lead us. That's the first part of Jesus' answer to his opponents.

But there is a second part to Jesus' answer which we should consider as well. He also tells us to "give to God the things that are God's". Now what would that be?

Consider that Jesus used a coin to demonstrate the notion that the government appropriately requests a portion of our income in order to support itself and provide necessary services. The emperor's image was on that coin. If we were to extend that a bit further along, might we not ask—where is God's image found? What belongs to God, based on this same logic of being imprinted with God's image? And the answer could most certainly be: us. We ourselves bear God's image, and it is imprinted on us, if you will, at the time of our baptism and throughout our lives of faith. A few months ago, Dale Davidson was baptized as an adult. Two weeks from yesterday, Emma Anderson will be baptized in our church as an infant. She is, among other things, Susan and Del Hubbartt's great granddaughter. When Dale, Emma, or any of us is baptized, the water is splashed on our forehead as the words are spoken, "I baptize you in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen." Then the sign of the cross is made; is imprinted; on our forehead with the words, "Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the sign of the cross forever. Amen." What image do we, as God's baptized children bear? The sign of the cross. The seal of the Holy Spirit. The image of God. The image in which we are told in Genesis 1, that we are created. Which would tell us that when it comes to being called to "give to God the things that are God", we are called to give *our very selves* to God. Great and significant though our calling to responsible citizenship is, our calling to give ourselves to God is an even greater and more significant calling, and it overarches all of our other callings. We are, without a doubt, proud and fortunate citizens of the United States of America. But, as St. Paul writes in Philippians 3, "Our citizenship is in heaven", so we are also citizens of a realm that is global, universal, and truly cosmic in its scope, and our deepest and most complete

allegiance belongs there. My point here is not to any way minimize our duties as citizens of a nation, but rather to just point out the proper ordering of things. When Christ urges us to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's, he's not cutting us in half and urging us to give 50% of ourselves to each. God's claim on us is paramount; God's image is on our very selves. We are a part of God's kingdom. And *within and beneath* that kingdom of God, we are citizens of a nation. In this case, of the United States of America. Therefore, our faith will shape our citizenship, just as it shapes our work life, our home life, and our passions, hobbies, and interests. Because God's image is imprinted on us.

Our baptism isn't the only time we experience that image of God being made upon us. Any time that sign of the cross is made upon us or over us, we are renewed in that image of God. It happens if you come forward for healing and anointing; it happens if you attend an Ash Wednesday service or a service of baptismal remembrance as we do every year in January. It happens over your casket at the side of the grave, and it happens every time the benediction is given with the sign of the cross as our worship ends. We are blest to be citizens of this country. No doubt about it! And we are called to participants, not spectators, in our citizenship. But how even greater is the blessing of being citizens of heaven, imprinted with God's image, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever. The realm of God's kingdom, where we are also called to be *participants, not spectators*. In living out our callings of citizenship and of faith, we always belong to God. It doesn't get any better than that. Amen.

Now, in case you're wondering nervously if I'm going to plunge into some contentious political issue here, set your mind at rest; I will not be doing so. I don't want to do so, and legally and practically, I cannot do so. I don't want to, because I hate to make people mad. I cannot do so legally, because as a representative of this church, which enjoys a tax exempt status precisely because we are not politically partisan, I cannot be politically partisan within my pastoral role, either. Nor can our congregation be explicitly politically partisan. There are legal reasons to avoid that, but there are also practical reasons, too—our society is terribly splintered politically and ideologically; we, as the church, need to be the place where people come together for forgiveness, community, and to work for the common good. We couldn't do that if this place becomes just another arena for political controversy. So, all that sets some limits on what happens here in a political way.

However, that said, Christians are by no means excused from civic participation on a personal level, and in fact, we are called to it.