

Entangled

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Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

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Scripture

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this and whose title?" They answered, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

Sermon

The chairs are lined up outside. They have been for weeks.

It's the sign here in Catonsville that we are about to celebrate our nation's founding and the local parade will pass by right here outside the church's doors.

I enjoy this tradition, this Fourth of July Parade. It is an occasion for joy as we commemorate the founding of our country, America's Independence Day. It's also an appropriate time for us, as people of faith whose commitment to Jesus Christ is above every other commitment, including commitment to the state, to give thanks that this nation in its founding, built freedom of conscience into its constitution and into its soul, and thus enables all of us to participate with respect and love, and express both affirmation and dissent as we continue to live in this great national experiment.

It is not easy, negotiating religious and political ideals, nor has it ever been. Currently, for example, the state of Texas has passed a law that will enable schools to allow unlicensed chaplains to serve as school counselors. Just this past week, the Supreme Court expanded how far employers must go to make accommodations for the religious views of their employees. Advocates and dissenters of issues such as abortion and the use of LGBTQ-positive materials in schools are both claiming that policies are infringing on their religious rights.

We have yet to see how these laws and decisions will play out in the pluralistic religious environment (and non-religious environment) that we live in. Will a school welcome a Jewish

chaplain? A humanist chaplain? What will happen when a Muslim employee refuses to work on a Friday because it is the day of worship for their faith?

The entanglements of faith and state are complex indeed and in our current environment they have gotten more fraught and certainly consequential. (Ken is planning, by the way, to offer a series in adult education this fall on the rise of Christian nationalism in the U.S., a unhealthy entanglement for sure.)

Christianity, we must remember, was born in the middle of religious entanglement and conflict with the state. It was there in today’s text as two opposing religious parties came up with a plan to get rid of Jesus by asking him, “How does a person of faith deal with competing demands of loyalty to the state?” Their purpose was to trap him: in answering would Jesus commit blasphemy against God or would he commit treason against Rome? It was a no-win question posed by the two sides: the Herodians, Jewish rulers who kept their power by forging alliances with the Roman government on the one, and Pharisees – the keepers of the Mosaic Law – on the other.

Jesus answers in a way that astonishes them. He asks them a question: “Why are you putting me to the test? Show me a coin. Whose image is on it?” It was the emperor. For Jews, this was a graven image – so blasphemous they didn’t even like to handle the coin; the Romans considered the emperor to be divine. “It is the emperor,” they said. “Exactly,” says Jesus. “So give to the emperor what is the emperor’s, and give to God what is God’s.” And what is God’s? Everything.

Everything. Our lives: hearts, minds, and soul. Everything we have, everything we are. It is a total commitment that is above all others.

As people of faith, and Presbyterians proclaim this loudly, we state that “God alone is Lord of the conscience.”

The Roman Empire, as we know, first ignored Christianity. But then, for several centuries, Christians – and Jews – were persecuted because of this very belief: ultimate loyalty belongs to God and not the emperor. In the fourth century, under Constantine, Christianity was co-opted by the state and it became the established religion of the empire. The entanglement had begun.

The Founding Fathers of this country engaged in a deep struggle with the conflicting claims of church and state, especially during the first thirty years of our nation’s history. They had come from such a model of state-supported churches. Taxes were collected to support clergy and church buildings. When the Continental Congress met, it was such common tradition, that most thought that the church could not even exist without the financial backing and doctrinal enforcement by the state, nor could the state exist without the moral and spiritual support of the church. (John Buchanan, “The First Freedom,” July 6, 2008)

It is fascinating to learn about the entanglements of theology and politics as our nation’s early documents and precedents were being hammered out. The key conflict was of the churchly ideal, especially coming from the New England Puritans, who wanted the American government to be established on a scriptural foundation, versus the Enlightenment commitment

to liberty and equality, which demanded that the state be stripped bare of any explicit moral or religious authority.

The conflict can be summed up as Divine Order verses Sacred Liberty.

Churches at the time were divided about this. Certain Presbyterians, the Quakers, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and Unitarians believed that the nation would not survive independent of a strong Christian government. And an equal number of Scots Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Jews, Roman Catholics and Deists championed a strict church-state separation as a guarantor of the religious liberty they had longed to secure.

(Forrest Church So Help Me God: The Founding Fathers and the First Great Battle over Church and State, 2007, Harcourt.)

It’s surprising to us now to hear that in the early republic most Baptists were on the religious left for church-state separation, while the Unitarians were lining up on the religious right, demanding a seat for God in government.

Our own faith forebears, the most politically active Presbyterians, in addition to the Congregationalists, actually rejected the Declaration of Independence as subversive to Christian values. They went so far as to wear black rosettes on the Fourth of July, and defamed as sacrilegious the red, white and blue that was brandished by the Baptists, Methodists, and Deists.

The politicians’ hearts were also a mesh of theological and political ideals and desires.

George Washington, for example, was so opposed to religious lobbying – as when the Quakers advocated abolishing slavery – that he cursed interference in government affairs even when he agreed with those who were trying to reverse the national policy. Whereas Jefferson, who helped build our famous wall of separation between church and state, worshiped at a chapel set up in the Capitol, and dreamed that one day all Americans would subscribe to a single “National Faith.” (Church)

The entanglement of faith and politics was particularly vivid during Washington’s inauguration. He’d been elected President by acclamation and received every electoral vote. The inauguration on April 30, 1789 was a momentous occasion, laden with images of Roman imperialism as well as with prayers. During his journey to New York, he passed through several triumphal arches. As in the Roman coronation of divine emperors, a laurel wreath was placed upon his head. Public prayer was offered by Presbyterian minister John Witherspoon, sole clergyperson to sign the Declaration of Independence, and President of the College of New Jersey, later known as Princeton. The inaugural ceremonies concluded with “divine services” as St. Paul’s Anglican Church in lower Manhattan, (a chapel that later became closely associated with the events of 9/11.)

Through it all, a diverse assortment of Puritans and Deists (those who believed that God created the world and then stepped away), Anglicans and Presbyterians, politicians and pastors,

argued and wrangled, compromised and complained. Oh, how they did complain! Passionately held beliefs struggled against and with each other, and yet.... in all this they came up with something profoundly new: a new thing was about to be born.

Steven Waldman puts it eloquently as he says, “The Founding Faith was not Christianity and it was not secularism. It was religious liberty, a revolutionary formula for promoting faith by leaving it alone.” (Founding Faith: Providence, Politics and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America, p. xvi)

There are many in this country who believe that we were founded as a Christian nation, but we were not. The Constitution makes no mention of God at all. The framers designed it as a secular document. It is only in Article VI that religion is mentioned at all, prohibiting any religious test for public office. It was James Madison, a Presbyterian, a student at Princeton who read theology and considered the ministry, who --- at the urging of the Baptists --- who went on to craft the first 10 Amendments, the Bill of Rights, the first statement that reads: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

Our founders, rightly wary of the exercise of the power of religion by the state, crafted something new: liberty of conscience and freedom of religion.

And for almost 250 years we have been learning, discovering, debating, arguing, gleaning, what this freedom looks like for the church and for the nation. One incredibly happy result is the amazing proliferation of religious expression in this country. Fears that the church could not survive without the support of the state have instead given room and rise to people of all faiths, and to people of no faith and that is indeed something in which we rejoice.

“Give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s,” said Jesus.

The image stamped upon the coin belongs to the emperor. But the image stamped on us belongs to the face of God. We belong to God. That identity shapes us in every dimension of our lives.... including the political.

Our challenge – in this absolute commitment to the God we know in Jesus Christ --- is to discover how to live this out in the world. And yes, we are grateful to be able to live it out in a nation that proclaims as its highest creed that liberty, justice, and freedom belong to all.

Today we give thanks to God for the privilege of living in a free nation, and recognize that our country, too, is under God’s providential care. We too may sing “America, America, God shed his grace on thee.” And we are citizens who as Ken wrote once, “have a responsibility to embody our faith where we live.”

We are grateful for all that is good and peace-giving and just about this country. We uphold its values of equality and welcome and hospitality. And also as patriots, we also call it to account when we love those ideals and values so much that we ask one another to live up to our best selves. A Times magazine article called these a patriotism of affirmation and a patriotism of dissent. We need both, it said. Both are precious.

We are still discerning, discussing, arguing how to live faithfully in our laws and in our discourse. As followers of Christ, we lift our voices and our votes as guided by our conscience, and pray indeed that:

*America, America.... God shed his grace on thee
And crown thy good with seroanthood* from sea to shining sea.*

(*Original text: brotherhood; "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies" Katherine Lee Bates, 1895)