

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees met together to find a way to trap Jesus in his words. 16 They sent their disciples, along with the supporters of Herod, to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are genuine and that you teach God’s way as it really is. We know that you are not swayed by people’s opinions, because you don’t show favoritism. 17 So tell us what you think: Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

18 Knowing their evil motives, Jesus replied, “Why do you test me, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used to pay the tax.” And they brought him a denarii. 20 “Whose image and inscription is this?” he asked.

21 “Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” 22 When they heard this they were astonished, and they departed.

May God bless to our understanding the words that we hear today.

Happy fourth of July Weekend to you all. On this weekend when we have the chance to celebrate our nations birthday it seemed appropriate to spend a little time giving thanks for the many ways that we are blest living in this country and to think a little bit about the idea of the separation of church and state and exactly what it does and more importantly what it should mean to us as citizens and as Christians. Will you pray with me please?

I was more than a little surprised this week to find out that the congregational church, one of the founding branches of the United Church of Christ was in the middle of the controversy that set in motion Thomas Jefferson’s letter where the

words “separation of church and state” first appeared.” And this time, we were not the good guys.

In 1802, then President Thomas Jefferson received a letter from the Danbury Connecticut Baptists that complained about the way that they were treated under Connecticut’s established Congregational church. The Baptist’s explained that “What religious privileges we enjoy (as a minor part of the state) we enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights; and these favors that we receive at the expense of such degrading acknowledgements as are inconsistent with the rights of freemen.” The Danbury Baptists acknowledged that the President had no legal authority in the matter, but they hoped that his sentiments would “Shine and prevail through all these states and all the world, til hierarchy and tyranny be destroyed from the earth.”

In his response, Jefferson acknowledged the “wall of separation of church and state,” but in no way did he express in his letter or in any of his other writings for that matter a sentiment to abolish religion or the public acknowledgement of God from the public arena. It is worth noting that the Virginia Statue for Religious Freedom, written by Thomas Jefferson in 1777 for his home states begins with the words “Almighty God hath created the mind free.”

From the beginning of our country. The ideal was that there would not be then, or ever, a mandated national religion. The First Amendments states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof:”

We need to remember that the colonists of the United States came from countries where the religion that everyone was supposed to participate in was declared by whoever the current ruler was. Either in the country, such as England or state by

state or county by county like in Germany. As an individual you did not have the right to choose how you worshipped, it was chosen for you. The right to religious freedom is what propelled the first colonist onto the shores of this country. And even then our founding fathers and mothers didn't always get it right as state churches were still the norm and anything outside of Christian Protestants often faced a difficult time as indicated in the Danbury letter.

Our Scripture today is a snapshot into religious freedom over 2000 years ago. We may think this is about paying taxes, but it's a little more than that. At the time of this conversation between the Pharisees and Jesus, Israel had been under the political thumb of the Roman Empire for 400 years. The Romans had tried hard to bend the will of the people to Caesar with only mild success. They had not been able to stop the Jews from worshipping their God, as a form of oppression they taxed them hard, incredibly hard.

The annual payment of this tax to Rome was a painful reminder of living in lands occupied by a foreign power. Religion was free...if you paid for it and the tax could only be paid with Roman coins which were not just legal tender but also pieces of propaganda. Most of the coins contained an image of the Caesar with inscriptions proclaiming him to be divine or the son of a god. One common phrase on coins during the time of Jesus was: "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest." This was difficult for the Jews since "Graven images" and polytheism, or the worship of multiple gods was against their religious laws. Paying taxes with Roman coins raised both political and religious issues.

The Pharisees who presented the coin to Jesus didn't really want an answer from him, what they wanted to do was to trap him. They figured that he would either give an answer that offended Rome and they could arrest him or he would give an answer that offended Jewish law and they could arrest him. The reply, "Give to

Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." got Jesus out of that trap but it leaves us wondering what it all means for us today as people of faith.

What does it mean to give to Caesar and to God? Does it mean separating religion from politics? Does it mean we should pay our tax but not let our spirituality impact our political decisions? Do religion and politics mix or not? And are we hiding behind that too often misused quote of separation of church and state?

These are questions for us to be asking and thinking about this election year. A year that feels over the top when it comes to politics both on the campaign trail and at home.

The original meaning of the First Amendment means that the government cannot tell us how to worship but it does not tell us that we cannot think about the government as people of faith. Our faith structures how we live, what issues we choose to fight for. Our faith should be a factor in how we think about politics and yes, who we vote for.

I know there are some who say that politics should not be in the pulpit and I agree to a point. The church can be and should be where and how we wrestle with some of the things that face our world today. Not in a way that tells us how or what to think or do, but in ways that invite us to live into our faith, into a way of living that is equitable and just, a way of living that is in fact prescribed to us over and over again throughout the old and the new testaments.

Sometimes our denomination, the United Church of Christ makes decisions and advocates in the community for particular issues. Sometimes you may agree, sometimes not, sometimes you may get the impression that the United Church of Christ is taking sides in politics. While this may appear to be the case I believe that in these situations men and women of faith like yourselves are seeking to

discern what it might mean to proclaim 'thy kingdom come' in terms of specific issues confronting our communities today. As individuals and as a community of faith I believe the challenge of being Jesus followers is to seek to discern, to figure out, how we might live out every aspect of our lives.

Jesus came and comes again announcing a new kingdom, when we pray 'thy kingdom come' we are making a political statement as much as a religious one. As we follow Jesus and witness to God's love let's not deceive ourselves: the original use of separation of church from government was not to divide but to provide equality, to provide freedom to be inclusive and not exclusive and it certainly did not mean that we turn our faith off and put it aside when it comes to politics. The political decisions that we make should be faith decisions, just like every decision we make in our lives; all of our decisions should be faith decisions. As we go out on this 240th celebration of American Independence, as we move into the fray of the political season in our country, as we figure out how to navigate in this world, let us do so as people of faith. HA