Rendering To God and Caesar
A. Stephen Van Kuiken
Community Congregational U.C.C.
Pullman, WA
October 8, 2017

“America, love it or leave it.” I believe that. The trouble with that slogan, which found its way onto endless bumpers during the Vietnam War, was that it didn’t mean what it said. It meant, “America, obey it or leave it,” as if national unity were more patriotic than national debate, especially when that unity seems to many to be based on folly.

...let us proclaim a new kind of patriotism, which takes as its object of ultimate loyalty not the nation-state, but the human race. —William Sloane Coffin

Invitation to Worship: (from the Charter of the United Nations)

We, the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war,
To reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women, and of nations large and small,
To promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,
And for these ends to practice tolerance and to live together in peace as good neighbors,
To unite our strength to maintain international peace and security,
To ensure that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest,
To employ international machinery in the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all people,
Have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims.

Ancient Witness: Matthew 22:15-22

I want to talk this morning about patriotism, the love of one’s country, within the context of our faith. Lately, people and politicians have been calling for football players to display their patriotism by standing for the national anthem and for punishing them if they don’t comply.

The passage that we have today is about misplaced love and confused allegiances. Here was the situation:

After 6 CE, there was a Roman poll tax which the Zealots, the nationalistic party, refused to pay. The Pharisees, although they were separatists and legalists within the Jewish community, were also somewhat politically conservative, for wont of a better word. So even though the Pharisees refused to take an oath of allegiance to Herod, for example, they did not resist too much. They had somewhat of a truce with the Roman government and paid their taxes. They reluctantly co-existed.

So it was a strange alliance of the Pharisees, who had sent a delegation to interrogate Jesus, and the Herodians, who ruled on behalf of Rome. Yet the temple elite and the emperor had one thing in common: they both exploited, oppressed and sapped the very life from the people.

And so the famous question: “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?” Now, this was not an honest question in search of an answer; it was a trap. Matthew says, “The Pharisees went and took counsel how to entangle Jesus in his talk” (vs. 15). They really weren’t interested whether it was lawful to pay taxes to
Caesar or not. All they wanted was to get Jesus. It was not just a tough theological question; it was a trick.

The Pharisees had created a no-win situation: Jesus will be damned if he does and damned if he doesn’t. If he said, “No, it is not right to pay taxes to Caesar,” then the Herodians and the Roman authorities would have him killed for treason. If Jesus said, “Yes, it is right to pay taxes to Caesar,” then the Jewish nationalists and much of the crowd would rise up against him.

According to Matthew, Jesus saw through this, knew their true intent, and called them “hypocrites” or “play actors.”

Jesus’ response, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” was amazing. Matthew says, “When they heard it, they marveled; and they left him and went away” (vs. 21-22). It was amazing because it was not a complete answer at all; it simply defined the nature of the problem. And yet, he was still able to get his point across. Reading between the lines, everyone knew exactly what he meant. There was no way the Pharisees could twist his response and trap him. In fact, he threw it right back at them. His answer backed them into a corner because it begs the question: Which things are God’s and which are Caesar’s?

As Robert McAfee Brown said in his book, Saying Yes and Saying No: Rendering Unto Caesar and to God, this splendid principle offers little practical help. It does not give us a simple answer. It is not like an ethical cookbook which we might follow in some recipe style. Jesus rejects in principle any ready-made formula. It requires his followers to think and to struggle with their choices.

The real issue in this passage is not just taxes or even the church vs. state; the real issue is to whom we owe our ultimate allegiance. Jesus was well aware of a central affirmation of his own Jewish tradition: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me.”

If we hold our highest allegiance to God, we must struggle with every situation. Discerning what is God’s and Caesar’s is not an easy task; it is a real test. Caesar, like any government, is sometimes with and sometimes against God’s will. So we need to be continually evaluating.

That great preacher and social prophet, William Sloane Coffin, wrote:

For Christians to render everything to Caesar—their minds, their consciences—is to become evangelical nationalists. That’s not a distortion of the gospel; that desertion.

There are things that do not belong to Caesar. No country is beyond evaluation and criticism. We render too much unto Caesar when the country is absolutized and above reproach.

Robert McAfee Brown’s point is that sometimes it is necessary to say “no” to the state if we are to say “yes” to God. Sometimes, he says, to render unto God means that we must withhold from Caesar.

So one temptation is to give too much to Caesar, and the other is not to give enough to Caesar. It was Grover Norquest who famously said that he wanted to make “the government small enough to drown it in the bathtub.” He has lots of followers these days. And lately we have seen a movement in this country to continually call for less and less taxes and for a reduction in the size of our government, except, it appears, for growing military spending. But the government or “Caesar” does have a right to some of
our money. It is not just our patriotic duty, it is our ethical duty as well. Jesus said, “give Caesar his
due.” In Romans 13, Paul wrote, “Let every person be subject to the governmental authorities.” Why?
Because the government often serves the purpose of God. Governments restrict bad conduct; they pro-
tect the weak from violence; they provide essential needs for their citizens; they support the poor and
vulnerable; and they help the common good, the well-being of all the people. “For this reason you pay
taxes,” wrote Paul, “for the authorities are God’s servants... Pay to all what is due them.”

And yet, there is a very unpatriotic movement in this country threatening to tear apart the fabric of this
nation. In 1952, under President Eisenhower, corporate income taxes were one third of the federal gov-
ernment receipts. They have declined to less than 10%. Corporate profits are at a 60 year high, while
corporate taxes are near a 60-year low. And many large and profitable companies pay nothing, due to
countless loopholes, bought and paid for by political contributions.

The offshore tax loophole alone cost the U.S. Treasury $90 billion a year. In a report a few years ago by
the Institute for Policy Studies and Americans for Tax Fairness (“Corporate Tax Dodgers: 10 Companies
and Their Tax Loopholes, 2013 Report”), many well-known companies used this loophole to avoid pay-
ing billions to the American people. Here are a few in 2012 alone:

- Bank of America had $17.2 billion in profits offshore on which they paid no U.S. taxes. Re-
  reported it would owe $4.3 billion.
- Citigroup had $42.6 billion in profits offshore on which they paid no U.S. taxes. Reported it
  would owe $11.5 billion.
- ExxonMobil had $43 billion in profits offshore on which they paid no U.S. taxes.
- General Electric had $108 billion in profits offshore on which they paid no U.S. taxes.
- Honeywell had $11.6 billion in offshore profits on which it paid no U.S. taxes.
- Microsoft had 60.8 billion in profits offshore on which it paid no U.S. taxes.
- Pfizer had $73 billion profits offshore on which it paid no U.S. taxes. While Pfizer sells 40% of
  its drugs here, it hasn’t reported U.S. profits in five years. In fact, it received $2.2 billion in fed-
  eral tax refunds from 2010 to 2012 while earning $43 billion worldwide.
- FedEx made $5.7 billion from 2010 to 2012 and paid zero federal income taxes. In fact, they re-
  ceive a tax subsidy of $2.1 billion.
- Verizon made $19.3 billion from 2008 to 2012 and paid no federal income taxes. Instead, it re-
  ceived $535 in tax rebates.

Now, one popular method of tax avoidance is called “inversion.” This is when a company buys a com-
petitor and then takes their legal headquarters as its own.

The tax plan being proposed by the Republicans this week includes a proposal to cut corporate taxes
from 35% to 20% because they are “too high.” But three estimates say that the actual effective corporate
rate of what they actually pay ranges from 12.5 to 19%. This proposal would also allow corporations
that have hidden profits overseas to “repatriate” $2.6 trillion at no cost, plus other loopholes that will
cost up to an additional $3 trillion over 10 years.

On the individual level, according to the Tax Policy Center, this plan cuts over $2.4 trillion over 10
years, with 80% of these cuts going to the top 1%. This is Robin Hood in reverse! This would be a
massive transfer of wealth to the very top.

This plan also repeals the estate tax that impacts only 0.2% of Americans, amounting to a tax break for
the super-rich. This is not about protecting family farms or small businesses. Just 80 farms paid any
estate tax last year, and their effective tax rate was only 6%.
These politicians try to justify this with an economic theory called, “trickle-down” or “supply-side” economics, saying that if we give money to billionaires and massive corporations, it will create jobs and raise wages. This has been thoroughly disproven, and even the elder George Bush said decades ago that this was just “voodoo economics.”

To try to pay for this money for the rich with massive cuts:

- $1 trillion from Medicaid
- almost $1/2 trillion from Medicare
- $37 billion from housing assistance
- $6.5 billion from nutrition for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)
- $3 billion from Head Start
- $4 billion from heating assistance
- $1.6 billion from school lunches
- $100 billion from Pell grants

The poor and working class will suffer.

On a state level, many of you know that Washington has the most regressive tax structure in the nation, where the poor pay more (7 times more as a percentage of income) and the wealthy don’t pay their fair share.

These corporations and billionaires don’t pledge allegiance to the flag, to the nation, or to anything else, except their own bottom line to enrich their executives and shareholders. And often, it’s the same actors, responsible for the legal but immoral looting of our national treasury, who are calling for austerity—cuts in education, cuts in programs for the poor and vulnerable, cuts in wages and benefits of public employees, cuts in wages and protection of average workers.

If we have a problem with patriotism today, it is not with those who oppose militarism, mass surveillance and the suppression of dissent. It’s not with those who protest the number of unarmed African American men who are killed by police and the lack of accountability. No, it is with tax-dodging, wealth-extracting, law-writing corporations who are undermining the well-being of the nation.

My ethics professor in college, Richard Mouw, who later went on to be president of Fuller Seminary, used to say that we need to balance Romans 13 with Revelation 13. We need to balance the image of the state as the servant of God with the image of the state as “the beast” or God’s enemy. For both Paul and John were writing not about two different countries but the same Roman empire!

And so we love our country but we don’t worship it. “It’s wonderful to love one’s country,” said Coffin, “but faith is for God.”

I have found it helpful, for many years now, to meditate of this wonderful little quote from William Sloane Coffin:

As I see it, there are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad patriots are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics of their country. The good patriots are those who carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country.
Let us each strive to become good patriots. As Albert Camus once wrote:

_I should like to love my country and still love justice._

An example of this highest form of patriotism was when Eisenhower publicly challenged the “military-industrial complex.” Even he could have hardly foreseen the escalation of unrestrained military spending to a perpetual wartime economy over the past five decades. Even he could not have foreseen the extent to which this nation’s future has been undermined and hollowed out by this misguided policy. It’s a sad irony that a sick and distorted patriotism of militarism would lead to the nation’s decay and demise.

We are called, it seems to me, to render to Caesar, pay taxes to the government, when we are, at the same time, rendering unto God, rendering to love, rendering to justice, rendering to the common good, rendering to the wellbeing of all. Jesus, I like to note, said “render to Caesar and God,” when they overlap, when they are consistent. The highest form of patriotism is to struggle to make this so, to help the nation live up to its highest ideals.

And so, we pledge our loyalties to church and state, but we give our ultimate allegiance to God and stand up for compassion and justice.

_We render unto God our ultimate allegiance._ May we so truly desire it that we shall weep for it. May we want it so much that is will be reflected in our tears, even at great personal risk. Nothing shall be more important. Nothing shall command more loyalty. It is an allegiance

  to the way of love,
  to compassion for the poor and weak,
  to the tears of the suffering and exploited,
  to the way of justice and fairness.

It is an allegiance to something stronger than any army or country or institution or any earthy force.

One of the most important religious documents of our time is the Barmen Declaration written in May of 1934, when Hitler was well into the second year of consolidating unlimited power. Most of Germany had capitulated to the Nazi vision. Even the church was taken over by the so-called “German Christian,” a group that was willing to follow the directives of the Nazi party. The church had lost its critical distance.

But, there was a small minority called the “Confessing Church,” who spoke out at great personal risk. Led by theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth and Martin Niemoller, they drafted this declaration that called for the rendering unto God those things that are God’s.

_Scripture tells us that... the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace..._

_We reject the false doctrine, that the State... should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life..._

_We reject the false doctrine, that the Church... should and could appropriate the characteristics of the State, thus becoming an organ of the State._

I want you to understand how courageous they were to say this, how they were accused of treason, how many lost their lives and how they embodied the highest form of patriotism.
Bill Coffin asked,

How do you love America? With the vision and compassion of Christ, with a transcendent ethic that alone can fulfill “the patriot’s dream that sees beyond the years.”

We remember those original lyrics of Katharine Lee Bates that call for best kind of patriots to continue the lovers quarrel:

America! America! God mend thine every flaw
Confirm thy soul in self control, thy liberty in law!

America! America! May God thy gold refine
Till all success be nobleness and every gain divine!

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)