

**WHAT BELONGS TO GOD?
AND WHAT BELONGS TO CAESAR?**

Matthew 22:15-22 & Psalm 96:1-9

On Sunday, September 24, 33 pastors from 22 states walked into their pulpits across America and told their people who to vote for in the upcoming election. In a concerted effort, sponsored by a conservative legal group – *Alliance Defense Fund* – those 33 pastors deliberately provoked the Internal Revenue Service into a legal battle over an ordinance that has stood since 1954, barring tax-exempt organizations from endorsing a political candidate for office. Should churches and their pastors enjoy the privilege of not being taxed and at the same time have the freedom to endorse to specific candidates for election?

On November 4 all of us who are 18 or older and are citizens of the U.S.A. have the opportunity to vote for candidates for office from the President of the United States to School Board Representatives. Will you exercise that right to vote and who will you vote for?

Within a couple weeks each of us should be receiving in the mail a hand written letter from a fellow member of St. John's inviting us to make our financial pledge to God through the work of St. John's Church for 2009. What will you commit to give out of all the blessings that God has given you?

When seemingly pinned down by his opponents with the perfect tactical question about whether or not they were required to pay taxes to the hated Roman Government, Jesus turned the tables on his questioners and asked to see the coin. *Whose face is on the coin?* he asked them. *Caesar's*, they replied. *Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and give to God the things that are God's.* Which of course leaves the question hanging, what belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar? We're still addressing that dilemma as our country wrestles with the separation of church and state. We're still addressing that dilemma as we determine our own civic responsibility and how we will make use of it. We're still addressing that dilemma as we determine what portion of our wealth and income we will give back to God and to God's work.

How are we as Christians supposed to give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's? What is our civic obligation? Of course in our country Caesar is not some dictator who rules from on high; Caesar is us! We elect and are responsible for the people who represent us in government. In the 13th chapter of his letter to the Christians at Rome Paul wrote that we should obey governmental authority as God-ordained. "*Pay to all what is due them*" he continued in verse 7, "*taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.*" Voting is one of those responsibilities, which is also a basic right of citizenship. It is part of giving Caesar his due.

In our country we also have what is called *the separation of church and state*. That means that the government doesn't get to choose one religious set of beliefs over and

above another and no set of religious beliefs and practices gets to enjoy special privileges. That's the principal behind the 1954 tax code. If a religious or charitable organization accepts the privilege or subsidy of not being taxed, which is offered equally to all religious faiths, then it lets go of the right enjoyed by individuals and tax-paying organizations to try and influence how people will vote. Is that giving up to Caesar a right that should belong to God? I don't think so. Our faith should indeed influence how we think, how we care for one another and the world, what we believe about politics and the world, **but** how we apply that in voting is a matter of individual choice and conscience. If a religion or church thinks otherwise, well then it can exercise that privilege and pay for it through paying taxes.

That doesn't mean that we give up the things that are God's in the political sphere. We have the right and responsibility as Christians and as a church to speak prophetically against injustice, against abuse, against policies and practices that go against what we believe to be God's will. Every time we say the Lord's prayer we declare ourselves politically to be aligned with God's Kingdom first above all others. *Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done.* At the same time we have to be cautious how we claim divine insight and revelation. History has shown us time and time again how easy and misguided it is to create a supposed theocracy where God or God's Law is in charge, when over and over again it is in fact human power and abuse and injustice that ultimately reigns under God's name.

We have thought about the question of what belongs to Caesar. What are the things that belong to God? Everything! Everything we are, everything we have, everything we earn, all of it ultimately comes from God's hand. God has given us ourselves. And more than that through the gift of Jesus his Son God has given us back ourselves, which we had lost. He has forgiven our sins, washed us clean, is loving us into health and ultimately loving us into eternal life with him. There is nothing we have that isn't God's. So how are we supposed to give to God the things that are God's?

Our Psalm today answers that question beautifully. *Sing to the Lord and bless his Name, proclaim the good news of his salvation; declare his glory among the nations... Ascribe to the Lord the honor due his name, bring offerings and come into his courts. Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; let the whole earth tremble before him.*

One very significant way we honor God and acknowledge his majesty and say *thank you* is to honor Him not just with our faith, our actions and our praise, but also with our wealth. Giving a financial pledge to God through supporting the Church is one of the most concrete ways we can acknowledge and give back to God out of all the abundance he has given us.

In the next couple weeks you will be asked to make that financial commitment. I would, of course like very much to see the level of giving go up, which in turn would allow St. John's to better serve those in need and better support the work of Christian education and reach out further to invite people around us to share in our life and work. But most of all, I hope and pray to see the number of people who pledge their financial support to

God through this Church grow. This year 130 people have pledged their financial support to the church. I hope to see many more of you join that number.

In this election year it is easy to see a primary way – through our voting – that we can give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. In this time also of our annual pledge appeal we can also see clearly how we can give to God the things that are God's.