GIVE THEREFORE TO CAESAR THE THINGS THAT ARE CAESAR'S AND TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
October 18, 2026

Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.

In Palestine two thousand years ago, two power structures vied for ascendency; the Roman Empire, and the Jewish religious authority. The emperor had installed his military garrison there, along with his appointed Procurator Pontius Pilate who was charged with managing Roman taxes, mines, granaries, and to keep the peace. The Jewish religious authority was there to oversee daily religious and civic matters. They were the priests and Sanhedrin and the High Priest at the top of this national power structure. Today's Gospel story addresses these religious and secular authorities.

Of all the Jews and Gentiles living in Palestine; most of them despised their Roman overlords; despised the social restrictions placed on them; despised the heavy taxes that went to support the pagan Empire. But there were some citizens who worked for and supported Rome; even among the Jews. These individuals were despised and considered to be social and religious outcasts.

The Gospel begins with these words: "Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said." And it was a very dangerous trap indeed. Those who came to trap Jesus were the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Herodians were a political faction who strongly supported the Herodian dynasty (the family of King Herod the Great) and, by extension, Roman authority in the region. So it was those with both religious and political connections and power who came to entrap Jesus.

We read how this encounter played out: “So [the Pharisees] sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying…, ‘Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?’” If Jesus would have responded plainly that, yes, it is indeed lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, the Herodians would have been pleased, but the religious authority and all the people would have rejected his message outright. But if Jesus would have denied the paying of taxes to Caesar, he would have been in trouble with Rome. So, how could he respond?

He asked them to give him a coin that is used in paying the tax; a silver denarius. Then he asked them: “Whose image is this and whose title?” They said; Caesar’s. Then Jesus responded very shrewdly and wisely: “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” The Net Bible adds this footnote: “Jesus is making a subtle yet powerful contrast: Caesar’s image is on the denarius, so he can lay claim to money through taxation, but God’s image is [imprinted within] humanity, so God can lay claim to each individual life.”

Jesus avoided this trap very adeptly, but his statement did put him in conflict with the Empire. You see, Caesar was considered divine and had the title Son of God. So, when Jesus assigned certain things to Caesar, and other things to God, he was saying that Caesar was not God, thereby denying the emperor’s divinity. And that was a dangerous thing to do in public, especially with the Herodians listening.

Jesus and his first followers were faithful Jews. But they were often found breaking various Jewish laws and customs which made them, in the eyes of the Jewish religious authority, an aberrant Jewish sect. As the Christian church continued to develop over the following three hundred years, it eventually made a clean break with Judaism. And being within the Roman

Empire, many of their actions were considered treasonous by the Romans, for refusing to sacrifice to traditional Roman gods or worship the divinity of the emperor. Consequently, they faced frequent persecution, suspicion, and a ban from state authorities. They had chosen when to render their allegiance to God rather than Caesar and thereby suffer the consequences. Those consequences included intermittent, localized, and sometimes empire-wide persecution; especially under emperor's Nero and Decius.

But things turned around for Christians in the fourth century. Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, legalizing Christianity and stopping state-sponsored persecution. He returned confiscated property and convened councils, which permanently changed the church's status from a persecuted sect to a favored institution. Following Constantine, Emperor Theodosius I issued the Edict of Thessalonica, which made Nicene Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire, thereby deeply entrenching the church with imperial power, wealth, and hierarchy.

Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. You and I give to Caesar when we pay our taxes and vote in elections, and act as loyal, patriotic Americans. But as faithful followers of Jesus, there are times when we, like those first ancient Christians, find ourselves at odds with the governmental structure around us; and possibly even at odds with our religious structures.

Author Isaac Wood wrote an article about the various allegiances in our lives that he provocatively titled: "I don't pledge allegiance to the flag." For those who are interested in reading his entire article, which I think is a very good read, I have placed several copies on the Welcome Desk. Mr. Wood makes a strong case about citizenship and patriotism and loyalty and allegiance. Here is one statement he makes: "A distant relative of

mine…[said that] his ultimate commitment, loyalty, and devotion are to Christ. He considers himself loyal to America, but if Christ and country ever collide, he will pick Christ without question." And I would not say "if" Christ and country collide, but "when." And when they do collide, we are called in those moments to make a choice of which allegiance we will choose; country, or Christ.

These choices of loyalty have to do with today's Baptismal service. In a few minutes we will be baptizing two beautiful children: Joyce and Bryson. And as we commit to support these children and their families, we will be renewing our Baptismal Covenant where we will promise, with God's help, to continue spending time in the apostles teaching and fellowship and breaking of bread and prayer, in resisting evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord. To proclaim through our words and our example the Good News of God in Christ. To serve Christ in ALL persons, loving everyone as we love ourselves. And to work hard for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being.

So whether or not we place our hands over our hearts and recite the pledge of allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic, we are called to pledge the deepest allegiance of our hearts, minds, and souls, to Jesus Christ; and to God's kingdom.

Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's alone.