



Westminster Presbyterian Church
 Knoxville, TN
 Oct. 22, 2023
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: "Render Unto Caesar"

Matthew 22:15-22 (NRSV)

22:15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.

22:16 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.

22:17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

22:18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"

22:19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius.

22:20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?"

22:21 They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

22:22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

"Render Unto Caesar"

Sometimes a question isn't really a question at all.
 It can be an accusation:

How stupid do you think I am?
 No need to answer that

It can be a demand:

Don't you think the sermons are getting a bit long around here?
Again, no need for an answer there.

Or it can be a trap:

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?

That's not a question so much as it is a set-up;
It's not a question so much as an expression of rage.

Our passage begins, "Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him." The Gospel of Luke is even more adamant about their bad intentions. Luke begins the story: "So they watched him and sent spies *who pretended to be honest*, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to...the governor." Just in case we had any question of their motives.

Their question is a trap because if Jesus says 'No, it's not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar,' their plot succeeds, and the Gospel of Matthew gets several chapters shorter. Take him to Pilate! He's preaching subversion of the empire!

If he says 'Yes, it is lawful,' then every radical, sick of Rome's boot always upon their neck, says Jesus is nothing more than Rome's puppet, equally sealing his fate. Sometimes a question isn't really a question at all.

Jesus, in turn, refuses to play their game:

"Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax."

"Whose head is this, and whose title?"

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

He calls them hypocrites for two reasons:

First, notice the coin. Pharisees were constantly working to follow the law to the smallest detail. By handing him the coin from their own pockets, they already have answered their own question. These experts in the law use Roman coins and therefore pay Roman taxes.

Second, they flatter Jesus by calling him “sincere,” and yet their question is an act of subterfuge. It’s the opposite of sincerity. It’s a threat, not a question; it’s an act of violence. Instead of giving to God the things that are God’s, they feed their hate and fear of this man Jesus, the son of God, with this question.

Jesus flips their question on its head. “[Give] to God the things that are God’s,” means life does not belong to Caesar. So, by all means, give to the emperor what he demands, because life is also not about those coins in your purse, no matter how much they claim ultimate importance, in your life and in mine. Our lives belong to God, and “No one can serve two masters,” Matthew 6.

Andrea Gibson is one of my favorite contemporary American poets. Gibson is also an LGBT activist, and uses they/them pronouns. They are currently undergoing treatment for metastatic ovarian cancer.

Last Spring, Andrea Gibson released a video of a spoken word poem for NPR’s Tiny Desk Concert series entitled, “Maga Hat in the Chemo Room.” You heard that correctly. It is called “Maga Hat in the Chemo Room.”¹ It is hilarious and heartbreaking.

The poem is about how we balance our politics with our commitments to one another, even when our views clash. It’s about what we owe one another, and what connects us at our most fundamental level. I’ll read a few lines:

*There is a man wearing a MAGA hat in the chemo room.
I can’t get a good look at him because my body is plugged in to a bunch of beeping machines but my partner just tore the headphones out of my ears to say, “THERE IS A MAN WEARING A MAGA HAT IN HERE!!!”*

*Who wears a Trump hat to chemotherapy?
Why didn’t this guy get the memo I got?
The one that said, ‘don’t wear political attire to chemo’?
Who sent that memo?
I sent it to myself.
Why’d I do that?
I have no idea.*

¹ Andrea Gibson, “NPR Tiny Desk Contest 2023 - Andrea Gibson - MAGA HAT IN THE CHEMO ROOM.” YouTube. Mar 9, 2023. <https://youtu.be/WCX-0zJTEbk>

Every article of clothing I own rocks a political slogan – March for our lives, rest in peace Patriarchy, Queerdo(e).

My own sister makes hates with the ‘E’ crossed out of the word ‘hate’ to spell simply ‘hat’ and I’m not even wearing that. Like ‘don’t hate people’ is suddenly too edgy of a statement to make. Have I become a coward?

Did my radical hysterectomy make me less radical?

Has facing my own mortality robbed me of my politics?

Please don’t tell me I’ve become one of those,

‘Can’t we all just get along’ people

– the ones I have always blamed for the fact that no one can get along.

So, you can see at the opening, Gibson is wrestling, between their political commitments and passions, and the fact that they do not wear their politics to chemotherapy. It’s a real question. If they really believe what they believe, why not wear it to chemo?

In often hilarious terms, the poem goes on and on for some time imagining how different Gibson’s own politics and priorities must be from this man with a Maga hat in the chemo room. But eventually the poem dwells on what joins everyone in that room together:

Gibson says,

Here’s what’s true. Here’s what’s true.

I don’t wear political attire to chemo because I desperately want this room to be a place where no one identifies me as their enemy.

I want to feel, what I rarely feel outside, that everyone here is rooting for me to survive, even Maga hat guy wants me to live for so long, I could walk right up to him, tell him I had to have my ovaries removed. He’d be so kind. He’d say, Andrea, you can absolutely have one of mine. Just here, have it.

Gibson continues,

There is a land that free, somewhere. We just think believing in it is a child’s prayer. Something you only let yourself want when you don’t know this world. But if that land can’t exist in this room where everyone’s being told they could die soon, how will it ever happen out there, where everyone thinks they have so much time.

I love that line, about a place of freedom, where we see each other for who we are, in the core of our humanity, a depth of humanity deeper than the disdain that we

feel for those we do not agree with, and whose values we do not share. Gibson has this hope, that deep down, love is greater than fear, division, hate. They say,

I feel it, in every cell of me now. That I am not a me. I am one eyelash on the eye of humanity, holding on for dear, dear life, trying to get the eyelashes beside of me to look in the right direction before we are all whipped off the face of this planet, that desperately wants us to live, of natural causes, like kindness, like caring, like knowing these bodies are clothes we are all growing out of so quickly, until one day, we will only be souls, who can see that we all just wanted the exact same wish to come true. I know we will know that, when we leave this world. The planet is just so desperate for us to know it now, too.

This poem is so much more complex than ‘can’t we all just get along?’ If anyone has a passion for their politics, if anyone sees their politics as not just right but urgent and ethical and essential, it is Andrea Gibson, and yet even deeper, Gibson senses an indelible, human bond in the chemo room, “There is a land that free, somewhere.”

They could have equally have said, “Give to God the things that are God’s”

I thought of that poem this week, when a rocket fell on a hospital in Gaza, and immediately everyone looked for someone to blame, so we could fit a tragedy into our own *us vs. them* narrative.

And I get it. We need accountability; sometimes we have to choose sides. I do it too, all the time. I split this world, into ‘us vs. them.’ Like Andrea Gibson, and like you, I am passionate about my convictions. I believe deeply in political activism. I believe activism can make this world a better place.

And churches err when we talk only about spiritual things and forget about politics and justice - the real material needs of our members and neighbors. The prophets and Jesus talked about justice, and power, and resources, literally all the time:

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,” Matthew 25.

In other words, attend to the material, but over and over, the lesson of the gospel is: never give material things ultimate importance. Never let wealth or power or even politics blind us from seeing God in our neighbors.

Give to God the things that are God's.

There is a deeper, human bond, that has to be greater than the things that divide us. This is why we are passionate in the first place. Otherwise, what are we fighting for and yearning for in our politics, if it isn't for greater love and inclusion and freedom?

Give to God the things that are God's.

This, by the way, is the underpinning of the church's practice of stewardship. And by stewardship, we do not mean simply and only pledged dollars. One of the many things I have come to love about Westminster is our understanding of stewardship as everything we invest into this community: time, and talent, and resources.

We exist in a culture that tells us to judge our worth by our wealth, our job title, our purchase power. It's a culture that tells us we better get *ours* before *they* take it away, *us vs. them*. In that culture, stewardship – giving solely to give, toward a people, place, and purpose that we believe in – does not make sense.

Because with stewardship,

- we are saying that our faith is more important than our bottom line,
- that the act of giving is more important than what we get out of it,
- that we believe that this world belongs to God and not capital, that our lives belong to God and not the timeclock, that it's not *us* and *them*, but *we* together, and God is at work redeeming every corner of this world.

The poet said, *There is a land that free, somewhere.*

In stewardship, we are saying that we believe in such a world too.

It's about building sanctuary,
it's about handing down faith,
it's about partnering with our neighbor,
and listening to God,
as the Spirit gives us eyes to see, that we, and *everything*, and *everyone* in this beautiful and broken world, belong to God.

Amen.