

CONFESSING CHRIST, SPEAKING DIGNITY

A version of the following sermon was preached by Rev. Paul T. Stallworth at St. Peter's United Methodist Church, in Morehead City, NC, on October 19, 2008 (Pentecost XXIII).

1. Read Matthew 22:15-22 (RSV).

2. This incident contains the memorable saying from our Lord: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (22:21) With this saying, Jesus is replying to this question about taxation: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" (22:17) After grousing about this question, after hectoring his questioners, after asking to see a coin with which the tax could be paid, after pointing out Caesar's picture on the coin, Jesus declares: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

This saying of Jesus has prompted Christians, through the ages, to think long and hard about God and Caesar, about Church and State. Just last spring, this passage from Matthew helped St. Peter's United Methodist Church think about the role of the State and the role of the Church, in response to a then-alleged murder.

November 4 is Election Day. On that day, most of us will vote. Before stepping into booths and registering our votes, we Christians should be reminded of some basic Christian truths. Since Matthew 22:15-22 is the assigned Gospel Lesson of the day, this is a good time for a sermon geared to the present political season.

3. First, allow a comment on pastoral style with regard to politics. As a citizen and as a pastor, I strongly believe in free speech, in civil political discussion in the church, when done appropriately and lovingly. Jesus Christ is the Lord of all, including political life. Therefore, Christians should be interested in talking about politics, among many other things. So, we should not be afraid to talk politics at St. Peter's United Methodist Church, at home, or out in the community.

Consider an example. There is a beloved brother in Christ who posts many, usually right-of-center, political editorials throughout our church building. (My opinion is that this is acceptable when the bulletin boards he uses are open to such postings.) Now, what would United Methodists of various political stripes say about these political postings? United Methodists on the Left might respond, "I disagree with these editorials. Get them off the church's bulletin boards." United Methodists on the Right might respond, "I like these editorials. You sure do not read such viewpoints from United Methodism's General Board of Church and Society." United Methodists in the "Extreme Center" might respond, "Let's just talk about making disciples." But I believe the best response would be: "I want to discuss that editorial with the man who posted it. I agree (or disagree) with it, but I want to dig a little deeper into its claims." Then conversation can follow; and that is good. Even a spirited, civil argument might follow; and that is very good. There is no reason to fear civil disagreements about politics in the Church. After all, we are bound together by the Holy Spirit, by baptism, and by the baptismal covenant. We are bound together so tightly that nothing can tear us apart -- not even political disagreements.

Political disagreements in the Church are good for us. But today, there seems to be a silencing of political discussion throughout The United Methodist Church. It seems we have become afraid to discuss politics or theology or anything that is weighty. This is the result of unbelief and cowardice.

The Church should be interesting, not boring. The Church should be engaging, not afraid. The Church should be willing to discuss the most important things in this world and in the world to come!

4. Again, two weeks from this Tuesday, we will vote. But how should we decide how we will vote? Oftentimes, we take a short cut: we vote for the candidates who belong to the political party of our choice. But at our best, we carefully consider the candidates themselves and compare them. When comparing them, we might use criteria such as these:

>Likability: Which candidate do we like the best?

>Experience: Which candidate is most experienced to be the most effective officeholder?

>Character: Which candidate has the most solid character to lead?

>Political Philosophy: Which candidate has the best political philosophy?

>Public Policies: Which candidate advocates the best public policies?

5. But more importantly, in our voting, we will want to respond to Jesus' challenge: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." Here Jesus truly challenges us. So what do we render to God or the Church? And what do we render to Caesar or the State? Those questions are before us all the time. They urge us to undertake many duties, many obligations, many things. But this morning consider this challenge with regard only to our voting next month.

During The Third Reich, Adolf Hitler was often referred to as the fuhrer (German for leader). During the Nazi years (1933-1945), a Lutheran pastor in Germany, Pastor Martin Niemoeller, declared: "Christ is my Fuhrer!" That is, Christ is my Leader! His message was: Adolf Hitler is not my leader! To many Nazis in Germany, this must have been a scandal.

In our nation, we might proclaim: "Jesus Christ is President, Supreme Court Chief Justice, and Speaker of the House, all in one!" But the point is the same: Jesus Christ is Lord. Our first duty as Christians is to recognize that truth, to confess that truth, and to live according to that truth -- in the realm of the Church and in the realm of the State. We remember that Jesus Christ is Lord, even as we cast our votes.

Again, Jesus Christ is Lord. Not the Republican Party. Not the Democratic Party. Not the mainstream media. Not talk radio. Not Ivy League schools. Not Atlantic Coast Conference schools. Jesus Christ is Lord. Only from Him do we receive forgiveness, new lives, commandments, direction, judgment, heaven. We do not make this stuff up, as we go along. We follow Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of all.

"Render...to God the things that are God's." How do we do this? First of all, by confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Church. And Jesus Christ is Lord of the State.

As Christians, we want to live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, even in Caesar's realm. Entering the realm of the State, we remain, first of all, subjects of the Lord Jesus Christ. Entering the realm of citizenship, we are, first of all, Christians, while we are yet citizens. So being Christian shapes our being citizens.

6. As Christians under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, what do we render to Caesar or the State? As Christians who are also citizens, our first and primary task is to remind the State of the dignity of the

human person. In the realm of the State and in the public arena, the Church lifts up the dignity of the human person.

Human dignity is known to the Church, to us. Human dignity is firmly established in the very first chapter, of the very first book, of the Bible: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them..." (Genesis 1:27-28) In His own image, God creates man and woman, every man and every woman, every boy and every girl. Thereby, God gives each and every person, without exception, a special dignity that cannot be diminished, that cannot be erased, that should be only respected. On human dignity, Christians and Jews get it.

This singular moral principle, the God-given dignity of the human person, is a part of Biblical faith. This moral principle of human dignity is part of the Church's faith. Through the ages, the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church has stood for the dignity of the human person. The Church will continue to do so until Christ returns in glory.

The truth of human dignity is deeply rooted in The United Methodist Church and in our Social Principles. For example:

"...Grateful for God's forgiving love, in which we live and by which we are judged, and affirming our belief in the inestimable worth of each individual, we renew our commitment to become faithful witnesses to the gospel..." --Preamble, The Social Principles, The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church (2004), p. 96, emphasis added.

"We affirm all persons as equally valuable in the sight of God. We therefore work toward societies in which each person's value is recognized, maintained, and strengthened." --Paragraph 162, The Social Principles, The Book of Discipline, p. 104, emphasis added.

Lifting up the truth of the dignity of the human person, the Church also reminds the United States of its founding principles: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." --The Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776), emphasis added.

7. Christians should be most deeply concerned where the dignity of the human person is assaulted most regularly, most violently. In our time and place, abortion is the severest assault on the dignity of the person. Each year in the United States, there are over 1,000,000 abortions. Since 1973, over 50,000,000 abortions have been performed in the United States. Today in our country, an abortion can be obtained for any reason or no reason.

To be sure, there are many issues that attack the dignity of the human person: economic greed, political greed, pornography, slavery in 2008, international terrorism, unjust warfare, and many others. But in our time and place, abortion is the most devastating and most common attack on human dignity.

Our Social Principles speak of "[o]ur belief in the sanctity of unborn human life" and the "unborn child" (Paragraph 161J, The Book of Discipline [2008]). Even in an ambiguous paragraph on abortion, our church recognizes the God-given dignity of the unborn child.

Because the unborn child and mother are often threatened by abortion in American society, we Christians would be faithful and wise to vote for candidates who want to limit abortion and against candidates who want to promote abortion.

Again, abortion is not the only political issue. But judging by the standards of Christian tradition

and teaching, abortion is the most important, most pressing political issue in our time. After all, there are so many helpless, defenseless, vulnerable lives at stake.

8. "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." We render to God the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord of all. We render to Caesar, or the State, Christian citizenship that is dedicated to defending, protecting, and advancing the dignity of the human person.

Adolf Eichmann was brought to trial in 1963 for coordinating the transportation system that brought Jews to concentration camps in Eastern Europe in the 1940s. Therefore, Eichmann was responsible for transporting millions of Jewish men, women, and children to their deaths. Was Adolf Eichmann a stark-raving-mad anti-Semite? No. Was Adolf Eichmann a calculating, immoral monster? No. Was Adolf Eichmann made of an evil essence? No. Adolph Eichmann was a fool. He was a fool because he "never reflected on the moral character of his actions." (Jennifer L. Geddes, Blueberries, Accordions, and Auschwitz: The Evil of Thoughtlessness)

"Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." As we render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, let us do so reflecting on the moral character of our actions. Let us reflect carefully on the moral character of our voting.
