

As I look at you sitting in the Church, I see that you are feeling very cold. It's cold, right? I promise I will do something. I know I asked for your opinions on a lot of things. You will notice that some things are different. The bulletin for instance, has changed. I am very open to whatever suggestions you have. Some of you have sent me notes or cards expressing your sentiments. I am grateful. When you say, "I don't like this or like that," just say it gently. (laughter)

In a small town, where everyone knew each other, where there was only one barbershop, a Rabbi went to get his haircut. After his hair cut, he got ready to pay the barber and the barber said, "No Rabbi, I don't charge the clergy for haircuts." So the next morning the barber found a loaf of Jewish rye bread outside of his doorstep with a thank you note. A couple of days past and a doctor – family practitioner came in to get his haircut. He got ready to pay and the barber said, "No Doctor, I don't charge doctors for hair cuts." So the next morning he found a bottle of wine outside his front door step. Several days later a Catholic priest came in to get his haircut and when he got ready to pay the barber said, "No Reverend, I don't charge the clergy for their hair cuts. You and your church has done so much for this town" So the next morning, the barber found 15 priests on his doorstep, ready for a haircut! (laugh)

I think it is a fact of life that people in society, people in Pleasant Hill respect their priests, rabbis, and ministers for their labor and ministry among them. I think they are grateful for this beautiful Church and school of Christ the King. My question to you is:

What is the role of Christ the King parish to the wider community of pleasant Hill or to the nation or the world?

And how does the Church contribute to the identity of a citizen, to civic virtue and welfare?

It is hard to escape the political implications of the story of Jesus and Caesar's coin. "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God." Right now we live through political campaigns and elections, the time of political choices, partisanship, and rival loyalties. Really, the reading today focuses on radical discipleship.

The gospel confrontation most likely represents a struggle between the party of Herod, loyal to Rome, and the Zealots, who refused tribute to Rome. Jesus seems to reject the Zealot contention, but he also distances himself from the Herodians. The story is not simply about competing jurisdictions of church and state, nor about the isolated question of paying taxes although both issues seem germane to our political campaigns today as it was then.

The Gospel is not about the choice between two political parties or factions that pulls us one way or the other. Absolutely not! The Gospel is really about a choice between Caesar and God. Caesar stands for the world with all its materialistic implications.

Jesus affirms our much larger obligation to God. "Give to God what is God's. What does

that mean for us? Give to God what belongs to God.

Let me tell you another story, which I know some of you know it already. A priest, minister and rabbi were playing their usual Wednesday round of golf, and started discussing their weekly collections. Specifically, they started to compare how they decided what portion of the collection to keep for themselves and what portion to give to the Lord. The rabbi explains, "I draw a circle around myself and toss the money in the air. Whatever lands in the circle I keep for myself. What ever lands outside the circle, I give to God." The minister says, "Yes, I use a similar method, except that whatever lands inside the circle I give to God, and whatever lands outside the circle I keep for my personal needs." The priest then proclaims, "Brothers we are in agreement! I use the same method, as well. Except, that when I toss the money in the air, and I figure that whatever God wants He can keep..." (laughter)

What does it mean when Jesus says: "Give to God what belongs to God?" Jesus asked the people to show him a coin and asked whose inscription and image is on that coin. They said, "Caesar," and Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar." When He looks at you and me, whose inscription and image do we have? We read in the creation account, in Genesis 1:27, God said, "Let us make humans in our image, in our likeness." How do we know what belongs to God? That which bears His image! Therefore, we are 'God's coins' and we belong to God. You and I who are made in the image and likeness of God belong entirely to Him.

What is God's? Everything is His! There's nothing that we can name that is outside the realm of God. It brings to mind Abraham Kuyper's famous words: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus was forced to deal with religious and political enemies who were plotting to entrap him in what he said in about church-state conundrums, and ultimately to have him killed. We seem to be living in a difficult age now too, with high stakes religiously and politically, if not all-out struggles unto death. What does Jesus teach us to show us the way through?

First of all, the Pharisees are actually right in their disingenuous comment that Jesus is sincere and teaches God's ways without either partiality or deference to anyone. "Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. And you are not concerned with anyone's opinion, for you do not regard a person's status." We must be careful as we engage religiously in public life to be sincere, impartial, and non-deferential ourselves?

So, it's a misreading of this passage to see it as a proof text for the separation of church and state. Jesus was regarded as a prophet and prophets were always challenging kings, principalities and powers, and the political order, in the name of the higher authority of God. Jesus began his ministry by identifying himself with the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to

proclaim release to the captives... to let the oppressed go free. Jesus' last directive to his disciples before he died was also prophetic, insisting that these followers be worldly activists.

Christians ought to be the best citizens in a country. Our responsibility goes beyond paying taxes. Giving back to the government should include being involved in the political process, by voting, by advocating Christian ethics amongst our elected leaders, by praying for them.

“If you see a baby drowning you jump in to save it; and if you see a second and a third, you do the same. Soon you will be so busy saving drowning babies that you never look up to see that there is someone throwing these babies in the river.”

A development worker once remarked, “Why help trees to grow, if the forest is going to be consumed by fire.”

In other words, a church by itself or a ministry like crop walk or shelter hike on its own will never be able to secure lasting improvements in the lives of people. We cannot achieve our goals in isolation from national or international political processes.

Sometimes we see the church as an island or islands of success in an all-too-hostile ocean.

We must learn to work with Governments, with other groups that agree with us and do not agree with us, we must learn to listen and respect other opinions. We need to support policies that help the weak and downtrodden, and that promote biblical morality. We must speak against the rape of the environment, the pollution of the school system, and policies that destroy families.

When Jesus says, “Give to God what belongs to God.” Another way of looking at this is: See first the King of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” A question for your reflection and my reflection today is this: Does your faith shed a light on everything that you do as you go forth? On your politics? On your work ethics? On your family? Does your God dictate your life or is it Caesar?