

FAITH WORKS: ALLEGIANCE TO GOD; MATTHEW 22: 15-22; OCTOBER 22, 2017; THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

We're talking these weeks about "Faith Works" – the theme for Giving 2018. As Julie Zenger, our lead co-chair for the campaign, said last week, you can take that phrase in lots of different ways.

I'd like to use it today to consider how faith works with regard to the things to which we give our allegiance.

Today's story of Jesus' adversaries confronting him about taxes, turns out to be a story not just about our allegiance to God but how we live out the network of allegiances, that is, in the ancient root of the Latin word 'ligare' or 'to bind', how we live out our lives through the network of things to which we bind or associate ourselves and that shape our days, our character and that define who we are over a lifetime.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and encounters yet another group of critics – representatives of church and state who sense that his depth of character and broad appeal to the people exposes their flawed character and tenuous grip on power. When he is asked if it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar he appears to be boxed into the corner of a yes/no question that either way it is answered will condemn him.

His request to see a coin and then his question to his critics, "Whose image (or "eikon" in the Greek) is on it," turns the tables on his adversaries. Clearly, Caesar's eikon is on the coin, they respond. Then render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, he tells them, and to God the things that are God's.

It is a brilliant response. He both answers the question and avoids committing a treasonous act. Rather than being cornered or trapped Jesus shifts the focus of the conversation and the responsibility for each of us to decide to what and to whom our lives are committed.

The unspoken implication of Jesus' use of the image of Caesar on the coin is, as Matthew's congregation and you and I well know, from the third chapter of the book of Genesis that we are each made in the image of God – in other words Caesar's image may be on the coin, but God's image is imprinted into our very being.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way to the church in Rome: "if we live, we live unto the Lord and if we die we die unto the Lord so whether we live or whether we die we belong to the Lord." The decision not to recognize and live out our allegiance to God has consequences.

Our nation is in a Tower of Babel moment that affects everyday life from singing the national anthem to small town war monuments to the way the commander in chief treats gold star families. Perhaps you remember the story. After the great flood Noah and his sons went forth and populated the world and the whole world had one language. As they moved eastward they settled on a vast plain and built a very large city with a very high tower made not of stone but of brick which they had discovered how to make; and they said to one another this will make a name for us and we will not be scattered over the earth.

But when God realized that there would be no end to where their self-importance and pride would lead them, he confused their language so that they spoke in many different tongues and did not understand each other and the Lord scattered them over the face of the earth.

I say we are living in Tower of Babel moment because it is as if, in America, we are speaking many different languages or, we might say, the languages of many different allegiances, yet we cannot find understanding or agreement. The body politic from left to right appears to be broken and scattered, like those confused tribes of the sons of Noah.

Yet, there are signs that in this moment of national disunity that maybe, just maybe something good is trying to emerge. Or perhaps another way to say it is that maybe this is a moment in which we have an opportunity to enable something good to happen.

It appears that we are starting to realize that the present intransigence across the social, economic and political spectrum will not take the nation where we need to go. And while the momentum of discord continues to fuel rancor and disagreement over our identity as a nation reaching from the breakfast table at home to the water cooler at work, some voices are beginning to call us to a higher allegiance, to a vision of solidarity and purpose based on moral principles rather than tribal dominance.

Just this past week the two most recent occupants of the White House, independently of one another, spoke about a path of healing for the nation.

Both George W. Bush and his former political rival Barack Obama agree that what holds us together as a people is our allegiance to the founding principles of this, the world's first and oldest experiment in pluralistic democracy. That two former partisan rivals called, in separate speeches, for a major course correction in our journey as a democracy reveals the degree to which they and other bipartisan experts consider our present path misguided and dangerous.

Both former presidents left out the names of elected officials who are weakening the nation's and world's confidence in American creedal principles and in so doing they gave the weight of personal example to their messages and elevated the discourse above the political food fight that has been taking place for too long.ⁱ

Nor did they pander in platitude, both leaders reminded us that bullying and prejudice in public life sets a national tone, provides permission for cruelty and bigotry and compromises the moral education of children; and that bigotry or white supremacy in any form is blasphemy against the American creed.

This was wisdom hard to dispute because we've been on this path before and know the damage it causes. Yet the way forward will not be easy. David Brooks, another voice, wrote last week, "we're in this moment for a reason...the populist tide is not going to be held off by passing a new tax cut...there has to be economic, social and political solidarity with those left behind, as well as penance from those who did the leaving. There has to be a new moral order that affords dignity for those who feel insulted."ⁱⁱ

I say that something good, despite the present discord, is trying to emerge. David Brooks refers to experiencing this moment in our national history 'for a reason.' Presidents Bush and Obama reaffirm and remind us of the principles that have enabled the nation to weather bad times and thrive again.

As we consider our giving for 2018, let us embrace Westminster's historic role as an agent of reconciliation. Matthew tells us humans bear God's image, and wherever we live and operate – in the social, economic, political, or religious realm – we belong to God. Our primary loyalty does not switch whether we are gathering petitions for a candidate or praying in church.

While Matthew's account of Jesus responding to a political question does not solve many of the questions about church and state it does set allegiances into an ultimate and penultimate order. God and Caesar, church and state, are not separate realms. The challenge of Jesus' answer to his critics is that we have to figure out how to express in word and deed our primary allegiance when other allegiances, other commitments and other institutions call for our attention, demand priority and sometimes even violate our allegiance to God.

Matthew's story operates in a subversive way in every context in which governments act as if citizens have no higher commitments than to the state or to the head of state – be it Caesar or some modern day military despot or populist dictator.

When the divine image in a person or group of people is denied and persons are made by political circumstances to be less than human, then Jesus' 'render unto God the things that are God's' comes with revolutionary zeal, and counsels advocacy for the oppressed and resistance to the oppressor.

Given the extent to which the weekly news cycle is preoccupied with the chaos du jour coming out of Washington it is helpful to remember where our primary allegiance lays and to accept the clarity with which that commitment allows us to see through the cunning and subterfuge. In a word, we don't need to play that game. But we can pray for discernment about how best to resist and counter the dehumanization of fellow citizens. Few vehicles provide as effective a platform for egalitarian values and justice for all as the banner of a church.

What we need now is to rally around wise leaders like Mr. Bush and Mr. Obama, and pundits like David Brooks, and robust support for congregations like Westminster who call us to speak to and live out our allegiance to the value and worth of every human being because we all bear the image of God within us.

And not just the value of our neighbor but for a system of balanced governance and leaders who respect civil liberty, human rights and the rule of law.

David Brooks writes, "There are moments when a society goes into decline. But many more when people just think society is in decline yet it's really in a bumpy pivot. This is such a moment. It gets better." Faith works when we honor the image of God within us and within our neighbor – the more we do that the more we render to God the things that are God's and reestablish what is good and precious. +

ⁱ Peter Baker, "By Leaving Out Trump's Name, Message Is Sent: Bush and Obama Take Aim at Divisions," *The New York Times*, Friday October 20, 2017, A1ff.

ⁱⁱ David Brooks, "Moving On Up or Down, Down, Down," *The New York Times*, Tuesday October 17, 2017, A23. Both of Mr. Brooks' comments in this sermon are taken from this op-ed piece.