

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

I'm sure you realize this; it's hard to miss it. There is an election fast approaching. How providential our readings today! It can't be that the people who worked on the Lutheran Service Book lectionary had our U.S. elections in mind as they assigned the Sunday's readings. Our lectionary is based on the Revised Common Lectionary, and that's used in churches around the world.

Thus, it's providential, as I said, that our Gospel reading for today happens shortly before our elections, for this Gospel gives us an opportunity as Christians to think about our relationship to the government. The Bible teaches that government is from God. St. Paul writes: "*there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God*" (Rom. 13:1).

The Bible doesn't commend any particular type of government. In the days of Jesus and the apostles, including Paul, they lived under Roman rule with the various Caesars as emperor. In America, we live in a republic of states with a federal government. We've been reminded often in the last year that, following the Constitutional Convention of 1787, Benjamin Franklin was asked: "Doctor, what have we got? A republic or a monarchy?" To which he replied, "A republic, if you can keep it." So whether an empire ruled by a monarch or a republic led by a president, we still confess that the governing authorities "*have been instituted by God.*"

People fret today about whether we can keep it. This election, we're told, is the most important one ever — that's what's claimed. On the other hand, depending on whom you ask, you'll hear that one or the other of our presidential candidates presents "an existential threat" to our country — that's claimed also. I suppose it could be. I don't know. I do know that empires don't last forever. Cyrus, whom Isaiah names, freed the Jews from their Babylonian Captivity, and eventually, the powerful Babylonian Empire fell to Cyrus and the Persians. So also the American hegemony will come to an end. Perhaps it's now, but I hope not.

Still, perhaps it's sooner than we might want to contemplate, given our current political climate. It's claimed that as a nation we may be more polarized than at any time in our history, save only the Civil War. Red states and blue states. Democrats and Republicans. Progressives and conservatives. Capitalists and Socialists. Oh, how we divide ourselves!

Most citizens are proud to be Americans, but we like to divide ourselves by our ethnicities: German Americans, Sudanese Americans, Japanese Americans, Mexican Americans, etc. We divide ourselves by our sex: men and women, by our sexual orientation: LGBTQ, and by our race: white, black, Asian. We divide

ourselves by our economic status: the haves and the have nots — or finer: the lower, middle, and upper classes.

You hear it all the time: “How do you identify?” And people will answer with “their truth,” even if it is not based in “the truth,” that is, in reality. And that divides us. This issue of identity is tearing this country apart. In a different context, Jesus said, *“if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand”* (Mark 3:25). Abraham Lincoln borrowed that phrase in his famous “House Divided Speech” given before the Illinois Republican State Convention after he had been chosen to be their nominee for senator. Back then, you know, senators were “chosen by the [state] Legislature” (U.S. Constitution, Article I, Section 3, Clause 1). Lincoln was addressing the divisions in our country over slavery: “A house divided against itself cannot stand,” he said. “I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free” (www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/housedivided.htm).

Certainly, love of country, rightly ordered, is not sinful. That we are to *“love the Lord [our] God with all [our] heart”* (Matt. 22:37), doesn't mean we can't love our country or each other. Jesus doesn't speak against Caesar in our Gospel lesson. Of course, the Jews despised the Romans who had conquered Judea and ruled it; and they chafed under that Roman rule. You know how they hated the Roman taxes and those who collected them.

But the Jewish leaders had also had their fill of Jesus. Therefore, in our Gospel, in their scheming to remove the irritant Jesus, they plotted how they might use this to entrap Him. The Pharisees sent their disciples along with the Herodians to confront Jesus and hopefully catch Him in His words. The Pharisees wanted to be out from under the Roman rule and taxes; the Herodians likely supported the taxes and Romans. Either way, they thought, they had Him. But just to make sure, they thought they would first try to disarm Jesus with their feigned flattery — “Oh, Jesus, you're so smart and fair” — before springing their trap: *“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”*

But Jesus was no simpleton; He knew their deceit; He knew their malice. *“Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?”* That's the way the ESV translates it, but they weren't really testing Jesus. Their question wasn't genuine; they weren't sincere; they didn't really want to know the answer. No, their purpose was evil, so the word is better translated “tempt”; *“Why are you tempting me, you hypocrites?”*

Jesus nimbly avoided their trap. He didn't speak against Caesar or the tax. *“Show me the coin for the tax.” “Whose likeness and inscription is this [on this denarius]?” “Caesar's.” “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.”* The Herodians were the ones disarmed. They had no cause to call for Jesus' arrest. Of course, we remember that the Jewish leaders would later claim

that Jesus opposed Caesar. Before Pilate, they accused Him: *“Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar”* (John 19:12) — another false accusation against the sinless Jesus. Nor could the Pharisees in this situation make a case that Jesus favored Rome over God. Render *“to God the things that are God’s,”* Jesus said.

Of course, God rules over all things, so all things truly belong to God. And He takes what is His and gives it to us for our good. Thus, He provides government and the governing authorities for our good and for the good of His church (Rom. 13:4). These authorities are God’s servants, St. Paul says, and we are to give them what they are owed: taxes, revenue, respect, and honor (Rom. 13:7) — *“Render to Caesar.”* To be sure, we may have to disobey an authority that commands us to do something against God’s word (Acts 5:29), but we are not to fulminate and plot against our government. The recent plot, therefore, against Michigan’s governor was not only foolish; it was contrary to Scriptures’ admonition for Christians to *“be subject to the governing authorities”* (Rom. 13:1), which, again, are from God Himself.

So, since all things belong to God, what are the things that we owe Him? The answer is simple: everything. St. Paul preached: *“he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything”* (Acts 17:25). What does that mean with regard to our stewardship? You’ll be receiving a letter soon asking you to think about what you have received from God, even in this time of pandemic, and then what you’re rendering — giving back — to God. You’re asked to respond. What do you have that is not God’s already? *“We give Thee but Thine own,”* the hymn goes. *“All that we have is Thine alone.”* What will you do with this “trust” from the Lord? (LSB781)

But even more than that, let us remember what God has done for our salvation in the giving of His Son unto death. He has taken the debt of our sin onto Himself and nailed it to the tree of the cross. He took the bitter pains of our punishment onto Himself and suffered the death of deaths for us. He endured the agony of forsakenness so that we would be spared of this torturous consequence of our sin. What do we owe God for these things?

The answer is just as simple: everything that we are: our trust, honor, and glory, our praise, our obedience, our endurance through tribulation, our eyes that look to the Lord alone for our being, for He alone is the Lord; there is no other, and *“In him we live and move and have our being”* (Acts 17:28). The writer to the Hebrews says it this way: *“Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ... Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God”* (Heb. 13:12-13, 15-16).

Yes, render to God the things of God — your whole being; for who are you? You are a Christian; you have been remade in Christ's image; you have been inscribed with His name; you are in Christ. Just like Emily was today, so have you been "*baptized into Christ*" and so, you "*have put on Christ*" (Gal. 3:27). You are a Christian; that is your primary identity, and that is what Jesus calls for us to render to God.

It's not bad of itself to remember your family or ethnic heritage. It's not bad to take pride in your nation, which, by the way, is stronger when its people focus not on diversity but on unity, when we remember that we are *E Pluribus Unum* — out of many one.

But let us put all other identities in their proper place. Especially, as Christians, let us remember that for us, the baptized into Christ, all these distinctions melt away. As St. Paul says: "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.*" (Gal. 3:28-29). And let us remember that this identity endures for eternity.

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.