

Oct. 19, 2008, Proper 24, year A: Matthew 22:15-22: Proper 24, Year A.
The Rev. Deacon Marcia Tyriver

I'll bet you might be expecting me to preach about
"rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's,
or about the separation between church and state...
or about stewardship.

No, this sermon is going to be about our promise in the Baptismal Covenant to "strive for justice and peace among
all people, and respect the dignity of every human being". (BCP p 417)

The Pharisees and Herodians knew Jesus did this very thing.

However, they tried to use that fact against him. They tried to falsely compliment him and sweet talk him into a
trap.

No, they didn't use the same words as our Baptismal Covenant.

They didn't talk about justice, peace, or respecting the dignity of all people.

But that was their meaning.

What they said was, "You are sincere...you show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with
partiality".

They were correct. He didn't play favorites, didn't show partiality.

He did not cow-tow or brown-nose for favor. He didn't show deference.

He didn't play the world's game of winners and losers, of enjoying power or privilege over others. He avoided
siding with the Pharisees, avoided siding with the occupying Roman army, and avoided siding with the Herodians
(who were the ruling Jewish party).

After sweet-talking Jesus, they set a trap by asking him, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the (Roman) emperor, or not?"

His answer avoided their trap. He stood clear of their manipulation.

He said that since Caesar's image and name was on the coin, it belonged to Caesar. "Give ...to the emperor the
things that are the emperor's". Pay your taxes. It's that simple.

But the more important part comes in Jesus's second directive:

"give... to God the things that are God's".

This is where our baptismal promise comes in again... the promise to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being". Because in doing this we are giving God the things that are God's.

We are acknowledging that each person is God's creation, created in God's image...(just as the coin bearing Caesar's image belonged to Caesar).

To give God the things, the people, which are God's, we need to recognize that they *are* God's, that they are precious in God's eyes. We are to respect everyone we know and see. We are to do this in peace, with justice, recognizing their and our dignity. The Pharisees and the Herodians called this showing deference to no one and regarding no one with partiality. We can call it giving to God what is God's.

So how can we today "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being"?

We can start with being at peace with ourself and in right relationship with God.

Then we can work on being civil with one another. There's so much incivility around us: road rage; rudeness to clerks and waiters, whom we may see as anonymous beings. And how about the AIG executives taking English hunting trips and spa weekends on tax-payers' "bail out" money! That's not justice, nor peace, nor respecting the dignity of every human being!

But whatever effort we make toward kindness, towards forgiveness, towards respecting each other...whatever dignity we return to one another goes out like ripples into the world and starts a healing process. We need this. Our world needs this.

Our Episcopal Church government is set-up to help us affect the world in which we live. We are organized in a democratic way which can be used to advocate for justice, peace, and the dignity of every human being.

For example, this past month our diocesan convention passed two statements deploring the cruel and immoral treatment of two groups of people. Trinity had 5 delegates there, and *we* voted unanimously for the two resolutions.

The first resolution was a statement deploring the inhumane way children of undocumented immigrants have sometimes been left parentless and families have been wrenched apart in an attempt to deal with the problem of illegal aliens. We voiced the need to deal in a more humane way with these people with whom we share humanity. That's part of what Jesus meant by saying "give...unto God the things that are God's". Don't leave the children parentless, don't wrench families apart in the effort to correct the problem. Find a different solution. Handle it differently. Work for justice in a more civilized way *acting* with dignity and treating the *other* person with dignity.

The second resolution condemned the use of torture, and we called upon the government to cease the use of this practice. We advocated stopping the cruel treatment of these people with whom we share God's image. We called upon the government to honor the United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane and Degrading Treatment, an agreement to which the United States *is* a signatory.

I wish you all could have heard our parishioners Rita and Dick Lynes address the convention on behalf of Christian morality, advocating that the church speak with a moral voice to the culture and government.

The convention stood on common ground with all humanity being part of God's creation.

“Common Ground”: that actually was the theme of the convention!

We acted within Jesus’s command to love one another.

This sermon isn’t about the separation of church and state, although that’s important too, as Fr. Bob reminds us.

Instead, it’s about separating *ourselves* from the ways of the world.

In a way, Christians are “watch dogs” for Faith and morality. Watch dogs and witnesses to the world because faith and morality direct the way we live all day every day. It separates us from all other allegiances. Jesus had no allegiances except to God the Father.

Jesus wasn’t a partisan or political leader, but he definitely had a passion for peace, justice, and respecting ALL people.

That’s what got Him into trouble. He didn’t favor the Temple. He didn’t favor the ruling nation. And the Pharisees and Herodians *were* interested in politics and partisan power. Our call is to be like Jesus.

I’d like to close with calling your attention to the obituary of an Episcopal priest who died early this month. It all has to do with what we’ve been talking about.

He worked for “justice and peace among all people” and for respecting “the dignity of every human being”.

The Very Rev. Francis Sayre was dean of the Washington National Cathedral for 27 years, from 1951-1978.

While dean at the National Cathedral, Sayre “used his pulpit to confront McCarthyism, racial tensions, and the Vietnam War”. He became “a leading national voice of conscience. ... Attracting thousands of followers, Sayre continued the cathedral’s tradition of preaching the social gospel, which applies Christian ethics to matters such as war, race relations, and economic inequality. From the pulpit he denounced the tactics of Sen. Joseph McCarthy at the Wisconsin senator’s peak of influence investigating Communist influence in government and Hollywood.”

“During his years in Washington he wielded his own brand of power, attending Cabinet meetings at the White House and arguing before Congressional committees on Capitol Hill.” (Star Tribune, Oct. 8, 2008, p B6)

Writing about Sayre’s retirement years in Martha’s Vineyard, the late New York Times columnist James Reston said, “Frank Sayre tries to be a link between the spiritual world and the political world of this town. He tried to make his service at the cathedral relevant to our goofy world by crying down into the town the moral implications of actions---or lack of actions---by the political citizens of Washington.” (www.mvgazette.com/article.php?18785)

OK, *we* can’t command the attention and audience Francis Sayre did in the national cathedral, in the President’s Cabinet, nor before Congressional Committees.

But it *is* our responsibility to vote and especially to witness among our friends, families, and associates...to live with civility and kindness, striving for justice and peace, and to respect the dignity of *all* people.

May I suggest another stage or way to witness and strive for justice, peace, and the dignity for all people. Join me in the Episcopal Public Policy Network.

There is an insert in your bulletin about the Episcopal Public Policy Network.

It’s organized within our national church to represent moral and social policies on which the Episcopal Church has voted and agreed. If you choose to join, you will be notified by surface mail or by email of pending national legislation the morality or immorality of which has been addressed by our Church policies. You, then, can choose to contact your state or national legislators and lobby for their action.

Would you like a way to express your moral convictions, your Christian morality to the government, to the legislative branch?

I have been a member of the Episcopal Public Policy Network for years. It's free. It feels good to me to let my legislators know that I, as a Christian, advocate that they vote in such a way as represents Christian morality.

My closing prayer is one which reflects our common ground, that all people belong to God, and we are to treat one-another as Jesus did, with justice, peace, and respect for the dignity of every person. ...that we are to give to God what is God's. It's a prayer from the Office of Morning Prayer.

Let us pray:

"O God, you have made of one blood all the peoples of the earth, and sent your blessed Son to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near: Grant that people everywhere may seek after you and find you; bring the nations into your fold; pour out your Spirit upon all flesh; and hasten the coming of your kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." (BCP p 100)