



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, OCTOBER 18, 2026

EXODUS 33:12-23; PSALM 99; ACTS 10:34-43; MATTHEW 22:15-22

WHAT DO WE RETURN TO GOD BY GIVING IT TO THE EMPEROR?

Matthew 22:15-22 *[The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.]*

What do we return to God by giving it to the Emperor?

What is our obligation to the state, to the political sphere of American engagement?

This question resonates, especially as the impulses of autocracy and empire stress-test our American liberal democracy in ways unimagined just a generation ago.

And in what ways is our obligation to the civic town square, to our pluralist society, also an obligation to God?

We believe everything belongs to God. This truth quietly underscores Jesus' answer to the trap set for him by the civic and religious

leaders when they ask him whether it's lawful to pay taxes to the emperor.

This morning's reading from Matthew's gospel puts us in earshot of Jesus' masterful reply, which he offers with a visual aid: a Roman denarius produced by his examiners. A close inspection clearly shows the emperor's head, stamped on the coin in sharp patrician profile, together with a title calling him divine.

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's," says Jesus, "and to God the things that are God's." It's a pithy response that brooks no argument. It cleverly addresses Jesus' interrogators' insincere

question about the lawfulness of the Roman tax without offending Rome or any would-be revolutionaries in Jesus' retinue.

I suspect many of you, like me, grew up with an interpretation of this teaching that looks no further than the neat "church and state" binary on its surface.

Good Christians are expected to pay their taxes to the God-ordained government without complaining, while also, certainly, tithing in church and giving back to God, whose special favor, by the way, rests with the nation.

Jesus was often pragmatic. His answer safeguarded him and his followers from being turned over to the Roman authorities before it was time. But I don't think he's opposed to the idea of Christians paying their fair share of taxes to sustain what we might call, borrowing from St. Augustine, "The Earthly City."

What's intriguing in Jesus' answer is that it goes much deeper than prudent tax advice. In fact, it isn't really advice at all. In outmaneuvering the authorities, Jesus gives us agency. We must discern what we owe the emperor, and of course, what we owe God.

God and the emperor aren't equal creditors, even if our republic draws a hard line between church and state. While most Americans rightly value this constitutional distinction for the sake of religious liberty, as Christians, we must go a step further. By

virtue of our baptism, we understand all that we are and all that we have according to our identity of belonging to Jesus Christ.

So again, what do we return to God by giving it to the emperor?

It's a rich time to ponder these things. We're in stewardship season with In-Gathering Sunday only a week away. All of us – parishioners and staff – have been discerning our monetary pledges supporting God's work at the cathedral for the coming year.

It's not quite tax season, but it is election season. For those of us privileged to vote in this country, how will we steward our political franchise come November 3rd?

Voting our faith-formed values is one way we give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's. The emperor may or may not like it, but he's earned our vote. Christians everywhere are called to vote, give, speak, and act¹ according to their conscience as faithful followers of Jesus.

Faithfulness must guide our discernment about what we owe and to whom. We are called to be faithful.

The most interesting invitation to Christian faithfulness in the civic square I've heard lately comes from an atheist. Jonathan Rauch, an author, journalist, and fellow at the Brookings Institute, styles himself as a gay, culturally Jewish atheist.

¹ Rauch, Jonathan. *Cross Purposes: Christianity's Broken Bargain with Democracy*, (Yale 2025).

I was at the Episcopal Parish Network Conference in March, where I heard Rauch give the keynote address in conversation with Presiding Bishop Sean Rowe.²

In brief, Rauch believes that Christianity is a necessary load-bearing wall in a functioning Western liberal democracy—specifically the United States. He believes the Mainline Protestant tradition maintained this load-bearing wall for centuries, but it has crumbled, losing its supportive strength.

The vacuum left by the shrinking size and diminishing political influence of Mainline denominations like the Episcopal Church has been filled by hyper-evangelical Christian nationalist cult factions drunk with power.

As theologian Carlyle Marney has said, "In cases where the Church has ceased to be in tension with Caesar, one of two things has happened. One, either Caesar has been converted, or, two, the Church has so watered down the Gospel of Jesus that it has lost the capacity to speak truth to power."³

Bishop Rowe pushed back on Rauch just a little bit during the keynote to remind us all that the Episcopal Church has a history of watering down the gospel to retain considerable class power. While there's never been an established church in the United States, there has –and I do think this is changing – been an establishment church. That's us. Our DC cathedral is called the National Cathedral, after all – it's the place of

state funerals for American presidents, whether or not they were Episcopalian.

Today, this is almost a charming carryover of a much more polite (if watered down) era of church power and influence. The opportunity today is very different. Both Rauch and Bishop Rowe believe that, as a church, we are called to cast a fresh, engaging, authentic vision of Christianity for a broken and hurting world.

With our words, actions, and resources, we need to break through the noise with a Christian promise for the world rooted in love and flourishing, offering pathways to peace and reconciliation, and – here's our baptismal identity again – championing the dignity of every human being.

We can't do this by trying to out-scream the loudest screamer in the room. We have to bear steadfast witness to a counter-cultural way of being, much as the church did two thousand years ago.

Rauch is utterly convinced that the Episcopal Church has enough riches in our deep well of theological treasure to promote an attractive, exciting, even winsome picture of core Christian teachings. All we have to do is figure out how to do this, and we begin to rebuild a more civil civic society.

This isn't a new idea, to be sure, but it's always worth a fresh and faithful try, guided by the Spirit, and she can work with anything.

² EPN Conference Keynote Address, Charlotte, NC, March 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPvDtHBUSOg>. Accessed 10-19-26.

³ Marney quoted in Ohmig, H. King. *Understanding the Sunday Scriptures: Year A*, (Read Mark Press 2007), 167.

Rauch's invitation stands out because he offers his own distillation – as an avowed atheist – of Christianity's foundational religious teachings.

Here's how this man articulates three core Christian teachings that he firmly believes – without believing in God – can not only shift the narrative but shift the world.

The first is, "Do not be afraid." Fear is the ultimate enemy of divisive politics and polarization between friends, families, neighbors, and nations. I think Rauch is right to highlight what God offers us here. We have nothing to fear, not ultimately—and not even presently. This doesn't mean we don't feel fear, but it's a powerful grace to remember that God is always with us, especially when we're afraid.

The second core teaching is: imitate Jesus. The gospels show us that Jesus was a radical egalitarian. We can do no better than to follow him and be guided by him in our engagement with others.

Third, forgive each other. What more needs to be said?

God's promise, "Do not be afraid," offers us a sure footing from which to ask again: What do we give back to God by giving it to the emperor?

Where, how, and with what gifts are we called to brave the civic square for our faith? What do we owe our country that we also owe our God?

I believe we owe the emperor our courage in speaking up and acting out to resist the narrative of Christian empire. We have an obligation to deny any more oxygen to the destructive fire of dangerous and counterfeit Christianity that has wed itself to much of American conservative political power.

I believe we give back to God and speak truth to power when we not only resist but reframe the dominant Christian narrative in this country. We give back to God when we offer a positive, life-giving, connecting, astonishing vision of the Christian faith. One that is grounded in scripture and tradition. One that is as true, ancient, and enduring as Christianity itself.

Jesus has given us freedom of interpretation with his instruction on paying taxes. What we determine belongs to the emperor and what we choose to give back to God is open to our earnest and prayerful discernment as individual and corporate members of Christ's Body.

Faithfully, and untrammelled by fear, let's begin.