

God, Country, and the Common Good

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Matthew 22:15-22

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As you may have noticed, several weeks ago we invited you to email and send in sermon topics for the month of July series called 'sermons on demand.' We gave some suggestions and also asked for yours. Thank you for the responses and as you can see on the back of your bulletin, the next five weeks are our attempt to take your suggestions to heart and to try our best to reflect on them light of who God is in Jesus Christ. We will deal with these topics not by themselves, but as we encounter scripture and what God might have to say through scripture's witness in light of these topics. I can't help but notice that no one was willing to give us much of a free pass or any soft ball suggestions, but now is the time in our world for communities of faith to discuss topics like these faithfully, respectfully, and civilly. From the very founding of our country and even earlier in colonial times, churches have been places in civil society where all matters of issues in the public square are discussed and debated. We are in dire need of such spaces in these days and pray that these sermons are generative contribution to that discourse in our life together.

Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. In spite of all the advertising everywhere, I don't think Jesus was talking about Caesar's Entertainment, Caesar's Hotels, Caesar's Experiences, and Caesar's Sportsbook, but instead he was referring to the emperor, the government, the state, and the country. It is interesting to take note on what exactly we mean when we talk about our country or this country or any country. It is not just geography, it is not just people, it is not just the ideals of democracy or liberty and justice for all, it is not just baseball, apple pie, or momma either, but perhaps all those ingredients are part of the fabric of our nation, even if it is not always easy to put into words what we mean by our country. My first week of seminary study took place the week of September 11th. I can remember several moments and images distinctly...first, I drove interstate I-95 through Washington, D.C., and into New Jersey, just 50 miles south of New York City. As I drove from township to suburb and through city underpasses, nearly all of them were draped with American flags and in some cases there were groups of people standing on the bridges and overpasses. They were not protesting or even all that organized, but they were fellow citizens from all walks of life coming together to grieve the loss of innocent life, to commemorate the freedoms and patchwork values that are at the center of our public life, to recognize the bravery of those who helped many to safety, and maybe to recognize that there are competing worldviews about how free societies should live and enjoy their freedoms. These gatherings of Americans were standing on those bridges and overpasses to grieve, to come together, and to express a loyalty to country to each other that transcended

region, culture, religion, political allegiance, and the many divisive and irreconcilable views we all carry around with us.

About ten days after September 11th, a friend invited me to attend a baseball game at Yankees stadium. He was a Baltimore Orioles fan and a huge fan of Cal Ripken and Ripken was retiring at the end of the year and was playing his last series against the Yankees. We met in Manhattan and got as close as we could to ground zero which was blocks and miles away. Before he went to New York, he has announced in the local paper in Texas that he was headed to New York City and would take donations directly from the local community to donate to the New York City Fire Department and to the families of fallen firefighters. On the streets of Manhattan, took more than a week's worth of donations that came from farmers, doctors, firefighters, teachers, and the rest of the cast of characters from his little town, and handed it all to a firefighter at a fire station in midtown Manhattan so he could get it put into the proper hands. I remember the firefighter saying, with tears in his eyes, that we would not believe how many times this happens in the course of the day, average Americans from average little places, bringing their outpouring of support to fellow citizens they did not know, probably would never see, in a part of the world they might never visit. He was overwhelmed by it all. Near that station, there was a selection of FDNY shirts for sale with the donations going to support the families of those lost in the towers, and I picked one up there and though my t-shirt is getting a bit thread-bare, it is my clothing of choice on the fourth of July, because it represents, at least to me, the best of our country. Ordinary citizens coming together from all walks of life, exhibiting a sense of civic pride and generosity, and a love of the blessings of this land even if the specifics are sometimes hard to put our fingers on or put into words.

That is why Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees here in Matthew is so interesting and so full of tension and strain. There are obviously obligations everyone has both to God and to Caesar, to God and country, and Jesus reminds us to give to God the things that are God's and to country the things that our country's, and that probably also implies not to give the things to country that belong to God. As a reminder of what a complicated question that can be, let us go back to the fall of 1781 when the surrender of General Cornwallis at Yorktown secured a decisive victory for the now five-year-old country. According to historians Randall Balmer and Grant Wacker, far from being a strong and unified country at the end of the Revolutionary War, America was in disarray, including its Christian communities. They remind us that at most, 'one person in ten, and perhaps only one in twenty, counted themselves a member of any organized religious body.' Perhaps even more divisive, 'many ministers had abandoned their pulpits, either to serve as chaplains or to fight the enemy.' Some of the ministers joined the fight as Tories, loyal to the British Crown, while others sided with the patriots, and still others 'refused to fight

for either side, an independence for which they paid dearly.¹ Even in the founding of our country, Christians were divided about what was the best way to serve God and country. On top of that, historians tell us that at the time of the Revolution people like none other than Thomas Jefferson argued that ‘people should be free to choose their religion, or no religion at all, just as they should be free to choose where they lived or what kind of job they held.’² This guaranteed not only religious liberty, but also religious plurality, and that the public square of American religion would be lively, spirited, and full of a wide array of characters trying to contend for their beliefs and practices, and in Richard Neuhaus’s words that would come to include, ‘priests and elders, charismatics and evangelists, healers and hustlers, Lutherans and Pentecostals, social activists and Businessmen for Jesus, millenarians and realists, Baptists, Armenians, and Enthusiasts of the Inner Light, it is all part’ of the lively public square that is religion in America.³ At its best, America welcomes religious liberty and therefore welcomes religious pluralism, religious diversity, and a lack of established religion in favor of a vibrant messy mix of cultures, peoples, and religious traditions, living out their faiths and seeking to live together as fellow citizens, dare I say, challenging each other and bringing out each others’ best in terms of Christian witness, commitment to live together, and pursuit of the common good for all.

Historians Butler, Balmer, and Wacker point us to an amazing fact; that the Constitution that was written in the 1780s never mentions God nor does it say anything directly about religion nor does it make any prohibitions against religion in any way. The First Amendment that guarantees freedom of speech, press, and freedom of religion, does not directly or officially seek to prioritize one faith or religion but seeks, as best as possible, to be friendly to practitioners of all. Butler, Balmer, and Wacker remind us that though ‘the founders did not want the federal government to help religion in formal or official ways, they held no qualms about its rendering incidental assistance, and they certainly saw no reason that government officials should hide their personal commitments,’ including President Washington setting aside November 26th ‘as a national day of prayer, repentance, and thanksgiving to God.’⁴ Perhaps our Constitution, in its own way, seeks to leave to God the things that are God’s and leave to Caesar or the country the things that belong in that realm, even though there will always be tensions and challenges and disagreements about where the line is drawn. Author Marilynne Robinson puts it this way: ‘As Americans, we should consider our freedoms—of thought, press, and religion, among others—the basic constituents of our well-being, and accept the controversies that have always arisen around them as reflecting their vitality. Not so long ago they were something new under the sun, so if there is still a certain turbulence

¹ Butler, Balmer, and Wacker, *Religion in American Life*, 155.

² Butler, Balmer, and Wacker, *Religion in American Life*, 158-159.

³ Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry*, 18.

⁴ Butler, Balmer, and Wacker, *Religion in American Life*, 158-159.

around them this should remind us that they are gifts of our brief history.’⁵ Perhaps that means then as practitioners of our faith and religion in a country with a wide array of religious practitioners it should be our duty as citizens, in so far as the common good of our country is concerned, that we should want our fellow citizens who happen to be Baptists or Muslims or Jews or Quakers or Sikhs or other pilgrims to be the best Baptists, Muslims, Jews, Quakers, Sikhs, and pilgrims they can be, and that they should demand the same from us. For those baptized into Christ, we cannot understand ourselves as citizens first foremost, but as ethicist Brent Waters reminds us, we alongside our other identities such as ‘Christian, child, parent, spouse, friend, worker, and patient—in addition to consumer and citizen;’ and we are bound together with our fellow citizens whether we get to choose them or love them by a common love of country and desire for freedom and justice for all who are part of our country.⁶ To love one’s country then, Brent Waters reminds us, means we seek to be good citizens who practice ‘civil virtue while avoiding uncivil vice,’ and that means at the very least that ‘political opponents cannot, or should not, be treated as anything other than fellow human beings entitled to moral and humane treatment,’ and that if ‘political bonds are irreparably broken as a result of divisive conflict, all parties ultimately suffer.’ If to love one’s country requires good citizenship, then what is required of us is ‘unselfish listening, toleration, respectful persuasion, and even compromise.’ Waters reminds us that these are not ‘signs of weakness, but of civil virtue—pluriform and at times contending expressions of a common good.’⁷

Presbyterian minister, Rear Admiral, and House of Representatives chaplain the Reverend Margaret Grun Kibben began her first week of work as chaplain the House of Representatives the week of January 6, 2021. Before the electoral votes were counted that day, she offered the prayer over the session and then not too many moments later she along with members of Congress were being escorted by Capitol police to a secure location. In the chaos of the moment, as she and members of Congress were sequestered while violent clashes took place in the Capitol, she was asked to pray again. Using the words of the 46th psalm, ‘God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble,’ she prayed for peace and shelter for lawmakers and she also lifted up prayers for those ransacking the Capitol, and then she ministered to ‘members of Congress, congressional staff, and Capitol police who appeared to be in distress.’⁸ Reflecting on day

⁵ Marilynne Robinson, ‘What Kind of Country Do We Want?’ in *New York Review of Books*, June 11, 2020.

⁶ Brent Waters, *Common Callings and Ordinary Virtues*, 150, 152.

⁷ Brent Waters, *Common Callings and Ordinary Virtues*, 152-153.

⁸ <https://www.deseret.com/faith/2021/1/11/22226044/house-chaplain-rear-adm-margaret-grun-kibben-besieged-capitol-riots-washington-dc-trump-congress> and https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/house-chaplain-insurrection-capitol-riot/2021/01/15/6540ba34-55ce-11eb-a931-5b162d0d033d_story.html

3 of her role as chaplain to Congress, Rear Admiral Kibben said this about her work as chaplain: 'it's important because...our daily lives are not separate from God's involvement in them. God is very much present and very much has come alongside each and every one of us as we labor in the vineyard. And if that labor is tedious, God understand the tedium. If the labor is under siege, God understand the crisis and walks beside us in still waters—as well as in the shadows of danger. Faith matters. It mattered on Wednesday, it matters today, and it'll matter tomorrow.'⁹

May such help us to see the powerful role our faith can play in public life and may we serve God, love our country, and care for the common good of all by living with such grace, courage, and civility. Amen.

⁹ <https://www.deseret.com/faith/2021/1/11/22226044/house-chaplain-rear-adm-margaret-grun-kibben-besieged-capitol-riots-washington-dc-trump-congress>