RENDER THIS!
A SERMON ON
MATTHEW 22:15-22

We have a Bible lesson before us and it is one of the most commonly quoted passages through the years, but unfortunately, it is quoted incorrectly.

Let's get our thinking straight on rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's and rendering to God what is God's.

The phrase "render to Casar those things that are Caesar's" is widely misused as a blanket endorsement of unquestioning authority to the state or to justify a clean separation of church and state. In reality, this saying from Jesus was a clever, subversive dodge to a political trap.

The phrase is commonly misused to command us to obey all government mandates and laws without exception, viewing earthly authorities as divine. And people will frequently use this phrase to suggest religion belongs in the

spiritual realm and politics belong to the governmental realm with no cross over.

Also, there are some who interpret the passage narrowly to mean “just pay your taxes and move on.”

The historical context of this passage reveals that this encounter was a trap. Religious and political enemies of Jesus, the Pharisees and Herodians, tried to trick Jesus. If he said yes to paying Roman taxes, Jesus would be viewed as a traitor. If he said no, Jeus would be arrested for sedition.

It all started with someone tossing Jesus a coin. Jesus asked to see the Roman coin used to pay taxes and he asked whose face was stamped on it. Upon being told it was Caesar’s face, Jesus gave his famous reply. More than a reply, it was a punchline.

By stating the coin belongs to Caesar because it bears his image, Jesus was making a theological point about ultimate authority.

Humans are made in the image of God. Therefore, while you may owe material dues and allegiance to the government, your entire self, your soul, your ultimate allegiance, belong exclusively to God.

Jesus established that earthly authorities have limited domains. He taught that God holds ultimate ownership over all things, everything.

Jesus' teaching does not sanction a divided allegiance, some to God and some to Caesar. Rather, Jesus forces us to recognize that everything belongs to God. To render to God everything leaves nothing for Caesar. That is, of course, unless we choose to place our faith in the idolatrous image and inscription engraved on a coin.

About that coin. Caesar minted coins, as was his right. He demanded some coins in return, again, that was his right. After all, his image was stamped on what he had made.

God has minted the human soul and God has stamped God's image on everyone. So, give Caesar his due, the temporary stuff of this world, but make sure to give God what is due to God.

As Paul writes in Romans 6:13, "Offer yourself to God as those who have been brought from death to life."

Some of you get upset with me when I preach an occasional political sermon. I don't care for politics all that much, to be honest. What I care about are values. I believe when it comes to politics, we Christians should seek to both live and vote by our values. Therefore, we should remind ourselves of what those values are and how they should affect our political engagement.

For those of you who would prefer me to never veer into political territory, I remind you that we Lutherans are theological heirs of a public and political theologian and pastor who wrote more than 1,000 letters to civil authorities, including letters regarding their

public policies. Martin Luther urged the civil leaders of his day to serve the common good. He admonished preachers to preach against economic injustice and public policies that worked against the wellbeing of the poor. He helped establish local systems of social welfare that respected the dignity of people who were poor.

As Lutheran Christians today, Jesus' call to love our neighbor as ourselves compels us to active public life on behalf of the common good.

Even our order of baptism highlights the covenant made with us by God that commits the baptized to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

When I was ordained to public engagement in the service of justice and peace, this phrase was spoken: "Consistent with the faith and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, every ordained minister shall speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, calling for justice and

proclaiming God's love for the world." To that vow, I said "yes."

To strive for justice and peace may be frightening and confusing because it is political. To be the public church is to care about and participate in God's public work. There is no such thing as private church.

As citizens of a democracy, we are bound by neighborly love to ask: Will this piece of local, state or national legislation move us toward justice, peace and the Earth's health? Can we in our congregations find ways to discuss issues, recognizing that Lutherans, like all Americans, hold different political stances: Republican, Democrat, Independent, popularly coded as red, white and blue.

So, let's talk politics, about rendering to God what is God's. But remember, this will always be a conversation about values.

First, there are biblical values of the kingdom of God on which we can all agree. Our faith-inspired vision of a beloved community

should unite and ground all our efforts to transform society.

Second, there are judgments on policies where there is room for disagreement and deep dialogue.

Third, we must be sure that faith leads over ideology. Faith over ideology, always.

The phrase, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's" is often used by those who wish to banish religion from the public square. Religion has no monopoly on morality and the verbal discourse we need to have about politics must be open to all citizens, whether they are religious or not.

Religious convictions can be translated into moral arrangements, which if they are to be implemented, must win the political debate. Religious people do not get to win just because we are religious, not even in a nation that clams a Judeo-Christian heritage.

Like any other group of citizens, we have to convince our fellow

citizens that what we propose is best for the common good, for all of us.

So, the question becomes, on what do we agree? Most of us agree that faith plays an important role in public life. Faith is personal but never private.

Martin Luther King, Jr said, "The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state." King never endorsed a candidate, but forced them to endorse his platform.

Red and blue, left and right are not biblical categories. They are political categories and religious people do not easily fit into categories. Nor should we.

God's politics resist ideology and often will call us to transcend our narrow political categories, placing our commonality as Christians above any political allegiance. We can come together around broader and deeper values.

God is not a Republican or a Democrat. The people of God must not be in the pocket of any political party. There is a danger in being too close to either side and not maintaining our critical prophetic distance.
We should be the ultimate swing vote, judging every candidate by our moral compass.

Remember, Lydon Johnson did not become a civil rights leader until a faith-based civil rights movement made him one.

When politics fail to resolve the great moral issues, social movements often rise up and change politics. The best American social movements have always had spiritual foundations. We are a divided nation, but perhaps we can find ways we might work together in the future on the great moral issues of our time.

We have done it before. In the great spirit of American social movements led by people of faith, such as the abolition of slavery, child labor laws, women's

suffrage, the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, we can do it again. Faith is the spark of social justice.

And this is the key. Biblical prophets tell us that God judges societies not by their gross national product, their military strength or their cultural dominance, but by their justice, especially how they treat the weak and vulnerable. Perhaps a new moral order is needed to bring us together. Just imagine what that agenda might be:
+Overcoming extreme global poverty, disease and hunger, as well as alleviating unnecessary poverty at home.

+Finding a better path to national and global security.

+Advancing a consistent ethic of the sanctity of life.

+Healing the wounds of racism and sexism.

+Ending human trafficking and promoting human rights.

+Strengthening marriage and families.

+Renewing the moral fabric of our culture.

+Protecting God's creation.

If we could agree on these basic values, we could reshape American politics. Deeply held values that are not bound to the right or the left could provide a new moral center for our public life.

Christians should be political, but not partisan; principled, but not ideological; clear, but also civil; engaged, but not used.

Because above all parties and politics, we are called to be faithful to the values of the kingdom of God.

So render to Caesar what is Caesar's, but render to God what is God's.