

October 22, 2017
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

“Whether or Not”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Isaiah 45:1-7 ~ Matthew 22:15-22

The Katy Independent School District (just outside of Houston) has drawn a lot of attention recently with the opening of its shiny new Legacy Stadium - a \$70.3 million high school football venue. That price tag makes it the most expensive high school-only venue in the country, but it's hardly alone in the high-rent district. In fact, it could be the second-most expensive venue in the state by this time next year. McKinney ISD (just outside of Dallas) currently is building a new stadium that was to cost \$69.9 million when it opens next year. But an expected overrun on costs will push it past Katy as the most expensive high school venue.

In a state that persistently ranks among the last in per capita dollars spent to assist the children of the poor, care for the mentally ill, or the rehabilitation of prisoners I have to shake my head in wonder. But then I also have to wonder about our fair state of Wisconsin that ranks dead last in the care and wellbeing of African American Children. There are many things about Texas that I love ... the grand sweeping vistas ... the fields of bluebonnets each year in the Hill Country ... the wonderful Mexican food ... but I also have to admit there are a lot of things about Texas that don't make me so proud. The state of Texas executes people at a higher rate than any civilized state since Nazi Germany. Campaign finance laws are a joke in Texas ... poorly written, hardly enforced, giving a great edge to powerful corporations and wealthy Texans in deciding who will run the state. These are matters of major significance. But the biggest concern for conversation in Texas churches this fall will again be *whether or not* they should be allowed to pray before high school football games ... even though the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans said “no” ... that it's not appropriate to use publicly financed sound systems for sectarian prayers at state sponsored events.

When the Supreme Court ruled against state sponsored sectarian prayers in public schools back in the sixties when I was in school, folks were disturbed. Some people blame every evil ever since on that decision ... school violence, teenage pregnancy, drugs, droughts, plagues, natural catastrophes. They said it was evil to outlaw prayer in our public schools. But my, my, my ... to outlaw prayer at our football games ... now they're messing with our religion! In one town near the coast the principal is defying the ruling, and the local Baptist preacher's daughter, who is a cheerleader, is praying anyway. In another town, the members of the ministerial alliance bring their own P.A. system to the games and belt out a prayer whether all the people in the stands want it or not. Ministers across the state are in an uproar ... but no one is asking what it says about a mentality where high school football games are so important that they must pray for them in the first place. Folks, it's not war ... it's just a game.

Don't get me wrong. I believe in prayer in the public schools, even prayers at football games. I just don't believe in state sponsored sectarian prayers ... sanctioned by administrators, led by teachers or teacher appointed students, controlled by the state. Didn't Jesus say something about praying in our closets instead of for public show? No one can prevent our children from praying

anywhere ... any time they wish ... but no one in a position of public authority has the right to make them pray either ... anywhere ... any time.

"Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's," Jesus told the Pharisees. "And render unto God what is God's." The Pharisees were trying desperately to win an argument with Jesus, to publicly to humiliate him. The depiction of Caesar on Roman coins was offensive to the Jews ... whose own coins bore no such human likenesses lest they break the commandment about graven images. But the Romans demanded they pay their taxes with Roman coins. The Jews hated paying taxes to the Romans anyway, of course, because they were paying for the Roman magistrates who ruled them and the Roman soldiers who oppressed them. So, the Pharisees were asking Jesus a trick question. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Meaning, of course, lawful before God, faithful to the Torah, which ruled out graven images altogether. If Jesus said, "No, it is unlawful," the people would be happy. But the Romans might arrest him for sedition. As far as they were concerned, Roman law took precedence over God's law. If Jesus said, "Yes, it is lawful," the Romans would be pleased, but the people would see Jesus as a puppet of the Romans and a traitor to God.

Jesus called for a coin. "Whose image is that?" he asked. "Caesar's," they snarled. "Then give Caesar what is Caesar's and give God what is God's." Clever! But what does that mean, really? We've been trying to set the boundaries for church and state ever since ... but we can't seem to agree on what properly belongs to the state ... and what belongs to God ... no matter what the state might say. How can we be citizens of God's dominion and citizens of our nation when the two sovereign powers often don't recognize each other? Which shall we obey first when the two conflict?

There was a time when a preacher could rush right into talking about what belongs to God, but these days, we need to talk about what belongs to Caesar first. Some people see no distinction between God and country, and that means their first loyalty is actually to the country. They believe that the United States of America is a nation chosen by God and therefore always right because God is always on our side. These are the people most easily duped by politicians who use religious language to exploit religious people.

On the other hand, some people feel a deep cynicism about American politics these days, somewhat well earned by our politicians. Many people have abandoned Caesar as much as possible. They don't vote, and they don't express their opinion to their elected officials. Many feel shut out, because their voice counts so little in a system where money counts so much. A few years ago, we were debating what public policy ought to be, and now we have to debate whether there should be such a thing as public policy at all ... especially where it comes to the poor and dispossessed. But if we are honest we must also admit that our government has done some wonderful things in the past, both within and beyond our borders, to help people. Effective, life enhancing programs have made a difference for thousands of people. What is wrong with helping the poor, the old, the infirm?

I believe deeply in the separation of church and state. As the constitution says, government has no business either supporting or prohibiting the free exercise of any religion. And I thank God for many well intentioned public servants. My friends, government is a good and necessary institution. Its job is to keep good stewardship over the commonwealth. We all complain about taxes, but we like to use the roads they build ... attend the schools they sustain ... trust the water

and food they inspect. We need the police and fire departments and the courts, who deserve our gratitude ... and require our careful oversight. Sure, we have to keep government accountable for how our taxes are spent. And it is not only our Christian duty, but good citizenship to voice our conscience on a variety of issues. Democracy only works when the people get involved. So, for us, rendering unto Caesar means paying our taxes with clear conscience ... no more but no less than our share ... getting involved in the political process ... and pushing to have our voice heard.

So much for Caesar. What are we supposed to give to God? Jesus isn't talking here about giving coins to God like we give them to Caesar ... and even though the church needs your coins, this isn't a stewardship sermon. Jesus has been talking about Caesar's image. Now he's talking about God's image. And where is God's image? What has God marked as God's own ... like Caesar marked those coins as Caesar's own by stamping his image on them? According to Augustine: *"It is as if Jesus had said: God, like Caesar, demands from us the impression of God's own image. Just as we repay Caesar's coinage to Caesar, so return the soul to God, shining and stamped with the light of God's countenance."*

We argue about the most trivial things ... whether or not to pray before a football game ... whether or not the money with Caesar's picture is an evil unto itself. All the while the real issue is whether or not we belong to God ... whether or not we are bearing the image of God ... whether or not Christ is in the world because we are in the world ... and whether or not we are willing to recognize the image of God in the people God wants us to help.

The Pharisees were trying to trick Jesus with a trivial question. They found they couldn't win an argument with Jesus ... just like Moses found out you can't win an argument with God. But you can't lose, either, because God moves the discussion to a level that matters. We say, "God show us where you want us to go." God says, "Wherever you go I'll go with you." We say, "God, help us get this pagan nation back on track." God says, "You get back on track and lead others to follow." We say, "God save us from this awful government." God says, "Maybe you should try to influence the government so that folks in real need can be saved."

I thank God for our nation, and for a government where "we, the people," have a voice. Of course, that puts more responsibility on us as "the people" than Caesar's citizens ever had. And I am grateful for a God whose righteousness and justice and love have been revealed. I am loyal to both. But do you doubt which of these loyalties Jesus considered the most important? Jesus said in essence, "Rome deserves it due, but your souls belong to God." Here's a spoiler alert ... thereafter the Romans and the religious leaders conspired together to crucify him.

God created us free to put our loyalties where we choose, and many different spheres lay claim to us ... God, government, family, career, church, social clubs, or service organizations. All of these are good. They all matter. They all ought to matter. But where does your first loyalty lie? Whose image is stamped on you?

One of my favorite movies is The Apostle starring Robert Duvall, and my favorite scene is where he prays ... "I always called you 'Jesus' and you always called me 'Sonny!'" My friends, the government knows me by a number they make me write on everything I send them. But I'm on a first name basis with God, so you tell me where my first loyalty should lie. Whose image is stamped on you?

Let us pray – but only if you want to.

Our God,

We are divided among many competing loyalties. Help us to get our priorities in order. May we extend to all people the dignity and respect which allows them to follow their conscience and choose you freely, without manipulation or coercion. Make us good citizens, and help us to make our democracy a land of plenty which leaves no one out. But above all, show us how to give you your due: our gratitude, our service, our souls. You are sovereign over all creation; rule over our hearts and actions for Jesus' sake. Amen.