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Matthew 22:15-22  
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Is it permissible to pay the poll tax or not? Jesus is asked. Show me the coin used to pay the tax? On that coin is the engraving of the emperor. So he says, pay the emperor what belongs to the emperor and God what belongs to God.

He didn't answer the question. He doesn't advise them to pay or not to pay. But he calls a question. What are your obligations to the empire? And what are your obligations to God?

You decide. What belongs to empire and what belongs to God? What are the claims of God in relation to the claims of empire.

Too often God and Empire are conflated. Like the idea of the divine right of kings. That was not a revelation from on high. That was our idea. Not God's.

After the conversion of Constantine Christians could become citizens and become soldiers. And it was after the conversion of Constantine that the church came to know itself as the State. Oh that we could reverse the conversion of Constantine. And oh that we did not have engraved on our hearts the phrase of the Roman poet Horace: "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country."

But what about "there is no greater love than this than to lay down ones life for ones friends." Jesus was not talking about war.

God and Country. Each needeth each. But when we conflate them it is problematic.

And yet how similar is the Christian cry for freedom, liberty, justice for all, and the battle cry of country. How often have we heard a stirring word about the scraping sound of a fighter jet across the sky: That 's the sound of freedom.

Freedom, liberty, justice, securing the dignity of every human being. We live and die for these things. Rightly. No question. But I dare say those things are not legitimation or justification for war.

The rhetoric of war is valiant, heroic, even romantic. But the brutal realities of war expose war's rhetoric as a lie. That's how World War I poet Wilfred Owen put it. And he served in World War I. War institutionalizes the machinery of death. What cause or duty can justify the endless rivers of blood and strewn body parts that cover this world.

Oh that we could build a society in which such a sacrifice was never called upon or justified.

And violence is escalatory. Look at human history. Violence begets more violence. The development of the atomic bomb for instance. It was hoped that such a weapon as this would end all war. Its devastation was so horrible we wouldn't dare use it again. But then we developed the hydrogen bomb. 1000 times more lethal, if we can even calculate that. Violence is escalatory. That's the nature of it. And that worries me. More than worries me. If only war could put an end to what ails us. Well, it might. Put an end to us. But war and violence is not going to save us. We know this. We know this.

What are our obligations to empire? What are our obligations to God? We must grapple with this. Wrestle with this. Answer this.

God and Country. Let me be clear. I love them both. Do not misunderstand me. I do not for a minute dismiss the service and sacrifice of countless human beings in service to God and

Country. I honor them. But what they experienced causes me to tremble.

The intoxicating mix God and Country has fueled hopes and dreams for centuries. And we are quick to say “to God be the glory!” But the realities of war are no glory. The horrors of war decimate the ideals of patriotism and national honor.

We see all this today. We can see it. In our living rooms, on our phones. We see the faces and bodies of war. We cannot turn a blind eye. And war always involves the slaughter of the innocent. Collateral damage we all it. It is the slaughter of the innocent.

I will be bold to say today, if the leaders of the institutions of God and Country do not address the futility of war they fail us. They fail humanity. And betray their own.

God and Country. It is not an uncommon belief that God is Sovereign. That no one can escape His (sic) almighty power. God will punish and eradicate evil once and for all. Our mighty fortress. I am afraid of that belief. It makes God sound like a strongman. Now we will claim as our own. But so will they. This belief becomes a perversion of both God and Country I am afraid.

So let me return to Jesus. Since he started this conversation today from my point of view.

Many are here today because of him. Or because we have an intuition about him. I will say he brought us here either directly or indirectly. And some are here today because we have an intuition about God. Some of us might have come hoping there is a place for us here. We know we can't make this life journey alone. We know we need each other. We're right about that. Some hope this is a place of hospitality and even linguistic hospitality. Where we can safely bring our hopes and dreams our sorrows and

losses our confusions and vulnerabilities and be heard. And not argued with. We don't need to agree. Well, this is such a place.

Jesus. Jesus is the deepest embodied intuition of what God is like in human form. Jesus is embodied intuition about the divine. The sacred. The holy. The human.

We know "He held radical light," to borrow a phrase from a poet. (Ammons). The early followers of Jesus knew it too. They knew he was starlight in a dark sky. "Starlight that pierced the twelve," says another poet. (Schwartz). And that light pierces us too. He "made the sea lie down" when he stood up in the boat. He was "tender and luminous and demanding... a thousand times more frightening than the killer storm," words from another poet. (Oliver) These descriptions don't tell us what to believe. They do tell us what an experience of Jesus was like.

He was beauty and wounded. A healer. Of things seen and unseen. Hearing him call your name could change your life. Being in the nearness of him would recalibrate your molecules. He made love come alive. Gave it another dimension. He gave "God" another meaning. He was fragrance in a barren desert. Made hope a promise.

Astonishingly he can make your seemingly one small drifting life an endless shimmering moment and make you believe infinity is a possibility.

He rose to a timeless level. Where he calls to us: Love one another. Love yourself. Love your enemies. As though they were you. Because they are. He knew what was needed for a future.

He was like us. And not like us. Or rather, we were not like him. But we can be. He said so.

With Jesus something in us dreams and hopes, longs for and hungers for a better world. On some deep, intuitive and imaginative level we know a better world is possible. We know this. We are capable of being part of that world making. We want to be part of that world making. We can be.

But war is not the way toward a future and a better world. There is another way. We must love one another. And so love this world as though it is the only one we have.

What are the claims of empire upon you in relation to the claims of God?

What are your obligations to empire? What are your obligations to God?

We must decide. We must decide. You must decide.