

Render Unto God

10/22/2023

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:

Matthew 22:15–22

Back in 2007 I was a community minister at Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village. At the time, our big project was the Sanctuary Movement. The goal of the Sanctuary Movement was to raise awareness of the bureaucratic inhumanity of the immigration deportation process and to provide relief to good people caught up in an unfair and unintelligent system.

For example, Jean, a member at Judson, was born in Haiti and came to the US as a very small child. As a teenager he got in trouble for drugs, went to prison and served his time. He got out of prison, was never in trouble again, got married, had kids, started a successful business, employed people. He was a good person, an important part of our community, and he was needed here in the US to care for his family and his employees. But legislation had been passed that said because Jean had once gotten in trouble with the law years ago, he was now a danger to all of us, and he needed to be deported to Haiti despite having no connections there, not speaking the language, and having two young children here at home. This was frankly a no-brainer for us, and we agreed that if it came down to it, we would give Jean “sanctuary” in the church, and make DHS come and get him if they wanted to arrest and deport him.

The senior minister at Judson at the time and one of my great mentors, Rev. Donna Schaper, was invited onto Fox News' The O'Reilly Factor to defend our work. Bill O'Reilly was flabbergasted that a Christian minister would even consider defying the law. "Render unto Caesar!" he said, "You're not rendering unto Caesar! You're putting compassion above the law!" And Donna responded, "Of course. What choice do I have?" And she told the stories of people like Jean and his family and how wrongheaded, and counterproductive, and unjust deporting him would be.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." Bill O'Reilly (in this situation anyway) was incapable of holding two opposed ideas in mind at the same time. He couldn't function in a reality where both immigration law and the Sanctuary Movement were required to get to the right answer. So incapable was he of existing in this kind of ambiguity that he could only bring himself to quote one quarter of Jesus' teaching, "Render unto Caesar," he said over and over again.

But, of course, that's not what Jesus said, is it? What Jesus actually said was, Give to Caesar that which belongs to Caesar. AND (you should always pay attention when Jesus says "and") give to God that which belongs to God. And so as Christians we at Judson looked at our beloved Jean and his family and we asked ourselves, "Do they belong to Caesar? Or do they belong to God?" And the answer was obvious!

Bill O'Reilly accused us of promoting anarchy. But the Sanctuary Movement wasn't about the abolition of immigration law, it was about sensible reform to immigration law and providing humane waivers to people like Jean who weren't a threat to anybody. Yes, we render unto Caesar. Yes, we render unto God. Yes, sometimes that's a little messy. But if the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function, then Jesus is showing us the quality of true intelligence.

Jesus is one of those spiritual geniuses who has no problem finding the middle way here, when so many of us have a hard time with it. It's not just sensible reform to immigration law, right? There are so many ways in which we can get stuck in the belief that the righteousness of my position is not just compatible with, but actually demands total inflexibility.

I'm not sure when it was that I first became politically aware of the plight and the suffering of the Palestinian people, especially in Gaza. I think it was around the time I was a community minister at Judson. There was then, and there is now, no doubt in my mind that our God is a God who is with all oppressed people. And that means that our God dwells with every Palestinian man, woman, and child in the Gaza Strip. And God will remain there faithfully until that place becomes a place where people can have hope for the future of their children. That has always been my belief and it always will be.

But I've been deeply discouraged over the last two weeks to see the inhumane inflexibility of the

responses from some on the left to Hamas' terrorist attack in Israel two weeks ago—responses that have blamed innocent victims, dehumanized them, minimized their suffering, and excused, romanticized, even defended their murderers. It's left our Jewish neighbors and friends feeling abandoned, wounded, and afraid for their safety. And we need to do what we can to comfort and reassure them.

Imagine if after 9/11 our closest allies and friends had used that particularly devastating moment to righteously critique America's policies in the Middle East. Imagine if they had suggested that our murdered neighbors and loved ones actually were legitimate targets for violence. Imagine if they had shown sympathy, even admiration, for al Qaeda. It's unimaginable, right? But for our beloved Jewish neighbors, here we are.

Do the Palestinian people belong to Caesar or do they belong to God? They belong to God! Do the people of Israel belong to Caesar or do they belong to God? They belong to God! Do we have the intelligence—the humility and the compassion to hold both of these truths in our minds and in our hearts at the same time? Jesus says we do.

Yes, it is complicated. Yes, it is messy. But if we are ever going to get to anything that looks like a just and sustainable peace in the Holy Land, if the solution is going to be something other than the total destruction of one people or the other, then we're going to need develop the spiritual capacity to hold all of the people—the Palestinian people and the Israeli people—in our hearts at the same time.

This is not an argument for neutrality. I'm not neutral. It's simply an argument for a love and compassion so great that it can even encompass and hold those we disagree with in their greatest moments of mourning and devastation. This, after all, was Jesus' greatest teaching—despite the righteousness of our positions, despite the wrongdoings—real or perceived—of one group or another, to love all our neighbors without distinction and without qualification. There are some who believe that's a wishy-washy, morally bankrupt copout. I believe that it's rendering unto God what belongs to God, and that it is the humble, compassionate, middle way to a true, lasting, and just peace. And may it be so for all the people—Palestinians and Israelis. Amen.