A Sermon for Every Sunday
The Caesar Question
Matthew 22:15-22
Carla Pratt Keyes

Last summer I preached a series of sermons shaped in conversation with Jim Wallis' book, *Christ in Crisis.* In this book, Jim Wallis argues that the cultural and political crises this country is facing relate to ways the American church has become disconnected from the teachings of Jesus Christ. Wallis challenges Christians to ask ourselves: *Are we standing with Jesus? Are we listening to what he said? Are we following that?* To help us evaluate whether we are thinking and acting in Jesus' name, Wallis explores eight radical questions that are central to Jesus's teaching: questions like "Who is my neighbor?" and "What is truth?" and "Who's the greatest?" and, you guessed it, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" Wallis calls this "The Caesar Question."

Before I delve into that question, let me share a word about the reason Jim Wallis' book appealed to me. I once heard Ryan Bonfiglio, who teaches at Candler Theological Seminary, talk about Jesus-centered churches and justice-centered churches. In this country, it seems like Christian congregations lean one direction or the other. Ryan said the problem with Jesus-centered churches is that they don't understand *Jesus was all about justice*. Start to finish! His public ministry proclaimed good news to the poor and release to the prisoners! The just treatment of people was Jesus' concern. But the churches that *understand* that – the justice-centered churches – have issues, too. One is that they aren't always good about showing their work. (Like in math class, Ryan said: students have to show their work.) Christians who take stands for justice are not always great at showing how their commitment to justice emerges from a commitment to Jesus. When I heard Ryan say that, I thought: it's what my congregation could be better about doing: *showing our work*.

So, the Caesar question. Knit into it – for me – is the idea that obedience to God sometimes requires challenging (and even taking a stand against) the government.

How do I get there?

One way I get there is by attending to the story about Jesus in Matthew chapter 22. Matthew tells about a day the Pharisees and Herodians asked Jesus a question they'd designed to get him into trouble no matter how he answered it. *Was it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?* If Jesus said "no," he'd incur the wrath of the Roman authorities. If he said "yes," he'd risk being branded a traitor to the Jews – a collaborator with Rome.

So Jesus didn't give a "yes" or "no" answer! Jesus asked for a coin, then he asked his opponents whose image was printed on the coin. "Caesar's," of course. Jesus said, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." It was a remarkable answer. It indicated: there's a place in life for taxes, for laws, for obedience to the systems of the world. The coin bears the emperor's image; he can have it! But as long as we're talking about images and what belongs to whom, we should ask: *what bears the image of God?* And you know: one of the first affirmations of scripture – our Genesis story – says that *people* bear the image of God. If we're going to give to God what's God's? That means *us* – our whole lives, our whole service. It puts human obedience to the

government into perspective, with God's authority over people *clearly greater*. But, I want to add: the point isn't *just* that we owe God our complete obedience. Christ's point is also that God is sovereign over us, in a way *no human emperor or master ever can be.* God has made each person in God's image with dignity and worth and the capacity to discern how our lives should be led; that is a liberating, empowering word.

The Caesar question is a question of discernment: where does our obedience to God trump our obedience to government? Where does following God's law mean challenging and even disobeying unjust human laws? We get some guidance from Jesus about this, as we *zoom out* to consider the larger story of his life and death.[i]

From the start, Jesus' earthly ministry showed a marked disregard for the social order of his day, which brought him into conflict with religious authorities who were invested in that order. Jesus messed with the caste system of clean and unclean, for instance. He invited a tax collector to be one of his disciples. He touched and even shared meals with all kinds of "sinners" and outcasts. (These were people to be avoided, not embraced!) Jesus also reinterpreted sabbath laws that were central to life in the synagogue. "The sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the sabbath," Jesus said, as his friends harvested wheat to eat. "Is it legal on the sabbath to do good or evil?" he said, as he healed a man's withered hand. Time and again, Jesus *broke* sabbath law. And he didn't do it quietly! Each time, he publicly asserted *his right* to do so. The religious authorities were *outraged* and began to plot with the political authorities about how to destroy Jesus.

Jim Wallis points out that Jesus might have just stayed in the country, formed his own little group, and lived as he wanted to live. Other religious communities did exactly that. But no. Jesus marched into Jerusalem, the capitol city, where the religious and political authorities of his time were settled. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey – the picture of humility and simplicity and nonviolence. He was representing and recommending God's alternative way. Jesus did this while, at the same time, Pontius Pilate, the representative of Rome, entered Jerusalem by another gate. Pilate came with horses and chariots and soldiers – symbolizing the arrogance, domination, and violent power of the empire. The contrast between Jesus and Pilate could not have been more clear.

And what's one of the first things Jesus did in Jerusalem? He went to the temple – the seat of political, economic, and religious power, and Jesus attacked the corruption there. He disrupted the operation of the temple by overturning the tables and driving out the animals for sale. That system of temple sacrifice had been lining the pockets of religious leaders, while oppressing the poor, particularly poor women. Jesus made it abundantly clear *he would not tolerate* this unjust economic system at the heart of Jewish life.

Why did Jesus have to die? Someone asked me that recently. I think many of us are troubled by this question, because the answers we've been given in the past do not feel adequate. Jim Wallis says he asked the question once at a Christian college. Why did Jesus have to die? The answer students gave was "to save us from our sins." But Wallis asked them to consider what might have been on Pilate's mind, as he heard about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his disruption of temple commerce. Wallis says, there's *no way* Pilate was thinking: "We need to crucify this Jesus to save American evangelicals from their sins." Wallis says, "Jesus was clearly killed because he was perceived to be a *threat,* a threat to the existing authorities. And he was accused of being a threat to the empire."

Wallis goes on to point out that, while the Bible only mentions the deaths of Judas and James, Christian tradition holds that all but one of Jesus' twelve apostles were *killed* for spreading the gospel. Most were killed by the state. And "there was a reason the Romans came to view Christianity as a threat to be stamped out, just as the Pharisees and Sadducees had viewed Jesus. [They saw Christians asserting the primacy of God's law over Caesar's law. And they saw that Jesus' name and teachings had *power* to upend the status quo they favored.] …. So they *shut that down* where they could. Wallis says, "We need to reclaim the Jesus who gave such pause to unjust and oppressive regimes."

How do we do that? In his book, written a few years ago, Jim Wallis tells some inspiring stories about people of faith and conscience who challenged the abuse and separation of migrant children and their families at the U.S. border. Folks were *speaking out* to challenge these policies. They were also *acting* to help. Sometimes they acted in ways that were "illegal" according to the U.S. government. They took care of undocumented people in medical clinics, for instance, and they transported those folks to church and other places. But often they were not breaking laws, they were simply refusing to be complicit with government policies they believed to be unjust. Some airline attendants and pilots refused to work flights that were separating immigrant children from their parents. Some people working in detainment centers sent pictures and videos to press and advocates on the outside; others resigned from that work. Ultimately, public outrage compelled the U.S. administration to retreat – at least in regard to this particular cruelty.[ii]

It makes me wonder where you and I, today, may be called to resist unjust policies: in regard to the treatment of transgender students, for instance … or incarcerated children … or pregnant women … or historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities. Where are *we* called to challenge unjust human laws for the sake of following God's law?

I heard a radical idea recently from Matthew Desmond, the Princeton professor who wrote the book *Evicted* some years ago, and *Poverty, by America* more recently. Desmond suggested that what's unjust today is how, in *this* country, (where *some 11%* of people live below the federal poverty line) *economic inequality is exacerbated* by housing segregation, predatory lending, and tax policies that favor the wealthy. Now, when I hear "wealthy," I think Desmond is talking about someone different than me. *But Desmond is talking to me.* He's talking to anyone who benefits from government tax breaks like mortgage interest deduction, or tax breaks on retirement accounts, health insurance, and college savings accounts. This is government aid, he says, and it does more to subsidize affluence than to alleviate poverty.

At the lecture I attended, Desmond spoke specifically about the way homeowner tax breaks help the wealthy at the expense of the poor. He said, "If we're homeowners, and we deduct the interest of our mortgage from our tax bill — that's a government benefit. And many of us say, "Well, that's very different than a housing subsidy or food stamps." But I disagree, [Desmond said. He explained:] Both of those things cost the government money. Both of those things drive up the deficit. And both of those things put money in our pocket. So instead of taking the mortgage interest deduction, the government could just mail you a check." That'd be the savings you'd take – same difference. Desmond pointed out that the government spends around $190 billion a year on homeowner tax subsidies … compared to maybe $50 billion on housing assistance for low-income families. (To be

clear, we spend more than *three times as much* on homeowner tax subsidies than we do on housing assisting for low-income families.) In a country with so many evictions and so many families paying 50, 60, 70% of their income on rent … how can we live with that inequality? What would Jesus do?

I'm imagining Matthew Desmond flipping tables in the temple (or the capital). He says, "what really angers me … is that a lot of times, when we put forward a proposal to stabilize people's housing situation or to cut child poverty in half, we hear over and over again, how can we afford it? How can we afford it? The answer is staring us right in the face! We can afford it if many of us took a little less from the government."

What Desmond wants is for the policies to change, but meanwhile, he has a suggestion for folks who benefit from our "lopsided welfare state." He suggests we undertake a poverty "audit" to examine the ways we are connected to systems that promote and maintain economic inequality …. And then? Start shopping and investing in ways that express solidarity with workers and poor people. He suggests we also "take a hard look at our own tax breaks, and start having different conversations with our neighbors, and our coworkers, and our family members, about those tax breaks." He says: Most of us, when we pay our taxes, think "Crap, that hurts." And they do hurt. Ronald Reagan said, taxes *should* hurt. Matthew Desmond says, "What if, next time tax season rolls along and your neighbor leans over the fence and is like, 'Dude, did you see the property bill this year?' What if you responded by being like, 'Dude, I can't believe I get a mortgage deduction for my home — and I don't need this thing! And I wouldn't have a problem with it, if there weren't this eviction crisis, and kids weren't getting evicted every day in this country. So I'm donating my deduction to local eviction defense, and I'm going to write my congressperson saying that they should *wind this down* for families like mine.'"[iii]

How 'bout that for giving to Caesar what is Caesar's and giving to God what is God's?

Jesus Christ came to pursue a world where hungry people are fed, thirsty people are satisfied, marginalized people are welcomed, and poor people are centered and elevated. To follow Jesus? … in a world where Caesar has very different ideas? It has never, ever been easy. So if it *feels* easy … perhaps we've gotten more comfortable than we really ought to be. Maybe we, who are made in the image of God, have some new discerning to do.

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[i] The description of Jesus' ministry in the next three paragraphs draws significantly from Jim Wallis' book.
[ii] All Jim Wallis quotes and references are from "The Caesar Question" in *Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus,* HarperOne, 2019.
[iii] https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/03/21/1164275807/poverty-by-america-matthew-desmond-inequality https://www.marketwatch.com/story/want-to-fight-poverty-take-a-hard-look-at-your-own-tax-breaks-princeton-sociologist-says-ed5ff868