

“Sabbath in God’s Sovereignty”
 Psalm 67
 July 1, 2007

The Rev. Christine Chakoian
 First Presbyterian Church
 Lake Forest, Illinois

Introduction to series on Sabbath Summer:

This summer, our sermons and worship are focusing on ways we experience Sabbath ... and how Sabbath transforms us along the way. Why Sabbath? It came to me during one insanely intense period, when I was hurling myself at my responsibilities that I am hardly alone in the frenzied pace of modern life. The pressure to succeed, to produce, to perform, to help others, to look good – all of us experience, directly or indirectly, the daunting and relentless expectations of this, our fabled community. One can debate whether the pressure in itself is innately invigorating or crushing – in reality it’s probably some of both – but that debate is not my agenda. My agenda this summer is to explore ways in which Sabbath not only offers us rest, but even revives and restores our perspective and identity. Sabbath helps us remember at our deepest core who – and whose -- we really are.

Poet Wendell Berry, in a piece in his collection appropriately titled *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems*, captures our restoration in this stanza:

“The mind that comes to rest is tended
 In ways that it cannot intend:
 Is borne, preserved, and comprehended
 By what it cannot comprehend.”

Let me read it again:

“The mind that comes to rest is tended
 In ways that it cannot intend:
 Is borne, preserved, and comprehended
 By what it cannot comprehend” (cited by Eugene Peterson in *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 109).

When we rest our minds, our bodies, and our souls, we give up control over outcomes, goals, laundry lists and grand agendas. We allow ourselves to be tended, carried, and comprehended by the very God who made us ... by the incomprehensible and sovereign God in whose hands we all rest.

Today, on this Sunday before Independence Day, I want to explore, ironically, our dependence on this sovereign God, and what this means for our personal and civic life together.

Listen to the Word of God as it comes to us in the Gospel of Luke, ch. 20:20-26:

“[Jesus’ enemies] were watching him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the

governor. So they asked him: ‘Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’ But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, ‘Show me a denarius. Whose head and whose title does it bear?’ They said, ‘The emperor’s.’ He said to them, ‘Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer, they became silent.” This is the Word of the Lord.

* * * * *

It was a set-up, of course. It wasn’t just the problem that nobody likes to pay taxes – that was as true then as it is now. The issue was much larger. The tax, or “census,” had been imposed on Judea by the occupiers, the Romans, in 6 AD. It was tremendously unpopular. A group of Jewish nationalists, the Zealots, instigated an unsuccessful insurgency against Rome; the Herodians, on the opposite end, supported it; the Pharisees, in the middle, grudgingly went along with the tax (Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark*, in the *Interpretation* series (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), p. 218).

Still others took religious objection to the coin of the realm itself. Scholars tell us that the coin not only bore Caesar’s image, but also this inscription: “‘Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Augustus.’ Not only the image of a face but also the designations ‘divine’ and ‘Augustus’ bring the coinage into the realm of idolatry” (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Vol. 3 in the *Sacra Pagina* series (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 312). “Should you pay taxes to Caesar?” was a political litmus test, as thorny as any political issue today.

Jesus’ answer is brilliantly shrewd. If he said, “pay the tax,” he could have been accused of idolatry; if he had said “do not pay” he could have been arrested as an insurgent (Williamson, p. 218). Instead he asked his questioners to show him a denarius – and, as scholars note, “The fact that they had a coin to produce shows that they used the currency and therefore were as much implicated by its suggestions of idolatry as if they paid the tax” (Johnson, p. 312).

But, of course, Jesus’ response didn’t end there. “Whose head is on the coin, and whose title does it bear?” he asked. “Caesar’s,” they answered. “Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” The question hanging in the air for all of us is *how* – as complex a question for those of us living in modern democracies as for those living in ancient Rome. Which of our loyalties belong rightly to the state, and which belong rightly to the Lord? How do we discern when those loyalties conflict? How do we live appropriately as citizens, but also keep the Lord ultimately sovereign in our lives?

I love the way my colleague and friend Joanna Adams puts it:

“[Jesus] forces his questioners to answer for themselves, while at the same time ... [reminding us that] one’s ultimate loyalty, one’s personhood, always belongs to the Author of one’s life and never to the nation in which one makes one’s home. The coin may bear the likeness of Tiberius, but the individual is made in the likeness of God. It is to God that the citizen of every nation belongs” (in “Religion and the Public Square,” preached 07/02/2000 at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA, citing ideas from Lamar Williamson’s commentary on Mark).

The idea that *we* bear God’s image in the way the coin of the realm bears Caesar’s image puts everything in perspective. Not only does it remind us who and *whose* we ultimately are, it also clarifies our relationship to everything and everyone else. Scholar Lamar Williamson, Jr. draws two crucial implications from this: First, Jesus “reminds us that all we have and are belongs ultimately to God, because God made both it and us.” What we own is not our own; we are stewards of it for the Lord. But second, this “also implies a higher order of concern for persons who bear God’s imprint than for things which bear the imprint of human labor and ingenuity” (pp. 220-1). We and our world become colossally out of kilter when we get these priorities confused. If our things matter more than our families and friends ... if our income and investments consume us at the expense of the people we employ ... if our new kitchen or vacation home seems more important than civilians in Darfur and our soldiers in Iraq ... if the convenience of our bottled water or the fun of our SUVs block us from considering the environmental needs of the next generation’s children ... then we have forgotten whose image and likeness we bear. And the converse is also true: when we place people above things, when we see – really see – the face of the stranger in need, when we look at the children around us, and marvel that one day they will have children and grandchildren of their own – when we see these beautiful human beings, we are catching a glimpse of the glorious image of God. And we remember how blessed we are, how truly blessed, to be called the children of God.

And we, of course, are *all* children of God, no matter what nation we call home. It is no easy thing to draw the line between a Christian’s loyalties to state and a Christian’s loyalty to God. What we cannot do is simply divide them. Scholar Lamar Williamson, again, says it well:

“Any division into two realms (finance/faith, church/state or the like) disbars God from some dimension of our life or excludes our civic responsibility from our obedience to God, misunderstands the teaching of Jesus. What Jesus makes clear is that our primary obligation to God includes and transcends every other duty” (p. 221).

Occasionally – rarely -- this means that duty to the state is subservient to our duty to God. I think of the founders of our own congregation who stood up against slavery as an abomination against God, even though it meant confronting the state with civil disobedience. But often, I believe, our primary duty to God requires us to use the citizenship we have to promote the values of our Lord.

This takes discernment, and Christians will not be of one mind about what these values are. But we are immensely blessed with the freedoms of our land. We do not live in a theocracy in which we are told what we must believe. Nor do we live in a kingdom, in which we have no voice or power. How shall we live as stewards of this remarkable freedom, then, for our time, in this place?

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, but render to God the things that are God’s,” says the Lord. Is there anything that does not belong to God? Jesus still forces us to answer for ourselves. What then, shall we say? Amen.