

**“... and justice for all”**

**First Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Dave Carlson  
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**Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 99**

**New Testament Lesson: Mark 12:13-17**

“In a time of crisis, uncertainty and policy debate, one would think that Christians in the United States would agree: When in doubt, we should support our leader and remain loyal to our nation.” Those aren’t my words. They’re the words of Gerald W. Schlabach in his article titled “We Pledge Allegiance.”<sup>1</sup>

Now before you judge Schlabach for saying Christians should support our leader and remain loyal to our nation – whether you agree or not – hear him out.

He says Christians should support our leader and remain loyal to our nation, and then adds: “Our leader, of course, is Jesus Christ. Our nation, of course, is the people called church, spread around the globe. Our pledge of allegiance, of course, is one that can be sung from within “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

Schlabach’s point about remaining loyal to Jesus and the church – particularly in times of crises, uncertainty and political nastiness – underscores the point Jesus is making in today’s New Testament lesson. Some Pharisees and Herodians (King Herod’s men) lay a trap for Jesus asking, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we (as Jews) pay them, or should we not?”

Now, the reason this was an issue is because the coin used to pay taxes carried the image of the emperor and an inscription saying Caesar is God. Clearly, this flies in the face of the first two commandments: have no other gods and don’t make and worship false idols, such as the image of Caesar.

It’s a pretty good trap. If Jesus says pay the tax he’s supporting a flawed and misguided governmental system, the Roman Empire with its abuses of power, accumulation of wealth, and disregard for the poor and disenfranchised. To turn the tables on them, Jesus shifts the question from politics to theology.

Politically and socially, Jews living in Roman territories had to follow the laws and participate in the tax system, whether they liked it or not. They had to be in the world, but not of the world, as the Apostle Paul would say.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald W. Schlabach, “We pledge allegiance,” Sojourners, January-February 2003, 15.

Interestingly, that's also what Jesus is saying. Asked about paying taxes, Jesus says, "Bring me a denarius ...." Looking at the coin, he says, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" "The emperor's," they answer.

"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." With that statement, Jesus is affirming that God is above the emperor, as ruler of all the world.

The emperor is in charge of the tax system, the abusive laws, and the torturous punishments of ancient Rome, but God is in charge of justice and righteousness, then, now and always. As we heard in our Old Testament reading from Psalm 99, in Jacob, God has established justice and righteousness.

Jacob is biblical shorthand for "the people of God." God has established justice and righteousness in us. As Christians, as churchgoers, as faithful souls seeking to know and follow God's will, we may not be in charge of the government – or we might – that's not the point.

The point is that those who know and follow God's will know how to work toward justices and to promote righteousness, in our homes, workplaces, communities, and yes, even in our government.

On Tuesday, you have the right and responsibility and the power to vote in a way that affirms your identity as a follower of Christ, your knowledge and love of who God truly is.

It's not hard to know what this means when you get to the polls on Tuesday. Jesus tells us just 10 verses later, following today's reading: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength "and" .... You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

When he says give "to God the things that are God's" he's talking about your heart and soul and mind and strength. If people were to actually do that – to truly search their hearts and souls and use their mind and strength to know and love God and to allow that knowledge and love to guide their choices, we would have no worries about this country or the world we live in.

That's Tuesday – truly discerning the will of God based on what we know and love about God, and then voting accordingly.

And then comes Wednesday. Whether your candidate wins or loses, whether in your opinion this country is headed in the right direction or careening off a cliff, on Wednesday we have the responsibility and the power to affirm God's supremacy.

God's supremacy means that God is above all else, and that includes any doubts and fears you may have regarding this country and the world.

There is much these days that defies the will of God. There is much in our world that grieves God and begs divine justice and righteousness. Because of our faith in God's supremacy, we can be certain that anything standing apart from God, in opposition to the Spirit of Jesus Christ, will fall. And even more so, that whatever is rooted in the love and knowledge of God will flourish, maybe not in our time, but certainly in God's time. God is working out divine justice and establishing a lasting peace, and he's doing it with grace and mercy. Apart from God's grace and mercy, not one of us can stand, humanity itself would have been obliterated long ago. God is not going to let that happen!

God's will for humanity is worked out across eons of time, beginning with the creation in the garden when we took that which we ought not to have – in our selfish desire to be like God, to play God with our lives and the lives of other.

God's will for humanity over eons of time, worked out in yet another garden, after our betrayal of Jesus on the Mount of Olives where he was arrested and sent to his death.

God's will for humanity over eons of time, worked out in yet a third garden, a garden where, according to John 19, verse 41, "there was a new tomb ...," the tomb in which Jesus laid only to be resurrected from the dead, to sit at the right hand of God, as Lord of all creation.

God's will for humanity, worked out over eons of time, even on this day, as we strive to know and follow the will of God.

We have the right and responsibility and power on Tuesday to let God's Spirit of wisdom and discernment guide our choices.

And regardless of the outcome, we have the gift of faith to steady us in our calling, to guide and inspire us as members and friends of this church, to assure us always – in good times and bad – that God has and will triumph, through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who rules over all the world, in ever time and place. Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

You have made us for yourself, O God, and called us to be a covenant people – a people set apart. We are set apart not for privilege but for service; not for special rights but for responsibility.

Our loyalty is to you and your kingdom. Our values and priorities, our pursuits and passions are to reflect your heart – a heart of love for the poor, a heart of justice for the maligned, a heart of compassion for the broken.

Transform us, merciful Savior, in those places where we are still attracted to the culture's agenda of power, money, beauty and influence.

Save us from serving unworthy gods, from chasing after fleeting affections, from investing our days in the temporary rather than the eternal.

We ask, too, O Lord, your blessing upon all those who need an abiding sense of your comfort and care.

We pray all this in your name, as you taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**