

GIVE TO CAESAR

LUKE 20:20-26

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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JULY 2, 2017/4TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Today we begin our summer worship series entitled, “Bind Us Together.” Throughout July and parts of August, we will be looking at how we are called to love (all) our neighbours and bear witness to our Christian convictions in the context of diversity.

We’re going to be looking at issues outside and inside the church. How do we think about and relate to people of other religions? Our indigenous neighbours? People that are differently abled? People going through different ages and stages of life?

How do we love one another well when we don’t agree about important issues in the life of the church? How do we honour those whose experiences and stories are very different from our own?

What does it mean to be bound together as the body of Christ? What does it mean to be bound together in shared humanity as citizens of the earth?

This week, as I was looking at the summer preaching schedule, three things occurred to me.

First, I’m going to give away the ending to most of my sermons already. *Love your neighbour as yourself.* ☺ This is, of course, what we are called to do to all people, inside and outside of the church. This is the way that we are bound together with people inside and outside the church. So, I won’t be telling you something you don’t already know each week. But hopefully we can learn a few things about our neighbours and

about critical issues that face us all along the way.

Second, I'm aware that some of the topics we're going to be talking about this summer have wide interest in our church, in the broader church, and in the culture beyond. It's therefore a bit ironic that I'll be talking about them during a time of the year when the church is often emptiest ☺. I hope that if you miss a Sunday or two or five because of summer plans that you take advantage of our church website where all the sermons are posted.

And third, it's probably obvious that I can't do justice to any of these big topics in a twenty-minute sermon. I hope that these can be conversation starters. I hope even more importantly that no matter how many loose ends I leave hanging on any given Sunday, that at the very least we will have together been invited to locate all of who we are and what we think about and wrestle with in the light of Christ and his gospel.

Today, we begin with Jesus' famous response to a question designed to trick him into choosing between allegiance to God or to the empire.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar and to God what is God's.

Ok, sounds good. It's a brilliant response. It got Jesus out of a pickle.

But what exactly *is* Caesar's? What do we owe political authorities? How do we "wear" our national identities as Christians, as Anabaptists, as followers of Jesus?

Yesterday, our nation celebrated its 150th birthday. It has been a weekend of celebrating the ways in which we, as a people of diverse ethnic identities and religions, are bound together by our common citizenship.

This is a weekend when many of us are thankful for being citizens of Canada, for the freedoms we enjoy, for the options that are available to us.

And we should be.

Our country has a high quality of life when compared to other nations. We have a liberal democracy with a good education system, and publicly funded health care. We are governed by the rule of law.

Our nation has a history of welcoming refugees, making room for diversity, and playing the role of peacemaker abroad.

These are good things, even if they are not enjoyed equally by all, as our indigenous neighbours have reminded us this weekend.

Some of us have personal experience or know people who have had very different experiences in other nations, where these things were not the case.

Some in our Mennonite family remember the deep gratitude that parents and grandparents spoke with regarding the welcome that Canada gave them when they were fleeing the horrors of war as refugees.

We should *never* take for granted the peace that we enjoy here in Canada. We should be thankful to God for our country and pray for its leaders.

But in the weeks leading up to Canada's 150th birthday, I've noticed an interesting phenomenon in conversation with people, on social media, in the more mainstream media. People often fall into one of two camps:

1. Unqualified patriotic affirmation of Canada. Canada is the greatest country on earth!
2. Unqualified protest of Canada due to its historical treatment of indigenous people; this Canada Day has been tinged by negativity in a way that I can't recall others in the past.

Opinions tend run pretty strong, as you may have noticed.

The truth, as is so often the case, is probably somewhere in between the two extremes. Canada is not perfect and we have done wrong by our indigenous neighbours. At the same time, there is much to celebrate about who we are. No nation is perfect. Every political entity on the planet likely has some violence in its past.

At any rate, I have nothing to say about those outside the church who fall into one of these two camps. But inside the church is another matter.

My concern is less with which pole we tend to gravitate toward as Christians than it is

with our attachment to political processes and nations in the first place.

Over time I have noticed a shift in how Christians in my orbit, including Anabaptist Christians think and speak about the politics.

It seems to me that we get really, really, *really* excited about politics. We get agitated if our preferred party or candidate isn't winning. We are euphoric if the right team *does* happen to be running the show at the moment. We interpret the news of the day in such a way as to praise or heap scorn upon the right or wrong team.

This was obvious during the run up to the US presidential election last year and, to a lesser extent, our own national election a year before that.

Judging by the inflamed rhetoric that saturated public discourse, it seems that Christians see the ballot box or the right brand of political activism as the most important thing in the world.

I'm not suggesting that Christians shouldn't be politically engaged, but sometimes I find myself thinking something along these lines: "Wouldn't it be great if Christians were as keen to locate their identity, meaning, and purpose in Christ and his church as we are with a political party/agenda?"

Sometimes it seems that Christians are pinning more of their hopes on this or that political leader or this or that cause than they are in, well, *Jesus*.

Perhaps it has ever been thus. Maybe it's just that social media thrusts the views of our neighbours into our faces in new ways and so it only *seems* that people are more driven by politics.

But the impression I often get from Christians, including Anabaptist Christians, is that politics is the theatre where our hopes and fears are increasingly negotiated, even though it is rarely, if ever able, to deliver.

Those of you who have lived longer than I have will have noticed that politicians and governments rarely live up to the rhetoric and fevered hopes that accompany their ascent to power.

At some point, now matter how great the nation that we happen to live in is, we all

come up against the simple fact that nation states cannot bear the weight of longing that human beings so often impose upon them.

We should know this, as Christians. We should particularly know this as Anabaptist Christians.

I think it would be fair to say that the very founding of the Anabaptist movement was predicated on deep suspicions of political power and how it was exercised.

Beginning with Constantine in the fourth century, all the way down to the twentieth century, Christianity has, to varying degrees at different times and in different places, been closely aligned with political power.

And from an Anabaptist perspective, this is a connection that should never have been made. Jesus was never interested in starting a new “empire” with the only difference between the new and the old being the word “Christian” prefixed to it.

The New Testament ideal was a kingdom community defined exclusively by its allegiance to Jesus, that could speak the truth to political power, and operated from the margins rather than the center of power.

They saw Jesus’ command, in each of the synoptic Gospels, to “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” They saw injunctions against retaliation, commands to love enemies, warnings about abusing power, and took them seriously.

They wondered how all of this could happen when Christianity was closely linked to political empires that relied on coercive violence for their maintenance.

They saw an inconsistency between the biblical ideal of a freely chosen life of discipleship and a political reality where one was a “Christian” simply by being born in a certain geographic location.

The early Anabaptists didn’t look to political realm to legislate their convictions. The church was called to be set apart, a city on a hill, an alternative community shaped by the teachings of Jesus.

And we’ve *kinda* followed this track for large chunks of our history. Not always perfectly

or consistently, it must be said.

But I think a healthy suspicion of politics, a realistic assessment of sinful human tendencies when it comes to power and violence, and a conviction that our identity in Jesus drives us across borders, is in our DNA as Mennonites.

So what do we owe Caesar? Well, what Caesar wants—what Caesar has *always* wanted—is our primary allegiance. And this is the one thing the first Christians refused to give. It is something that our Anabaptist forbears refused to give. It is why they were hunted and persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants alike.

In *Desiring the Kingdom*, Jamie Smith talks about how as human beings we are what we love.

More specifically, what we love ultimately or what we love as ultimate is the most important thing about who we are and where we are going.

On this Canada Day weekend, I wonder... Could all the patriotism (or anti-patriotism) that saturates the public square be described as a kind of misplaced love and longing? In a world where the horizons of our hope are continually shrinking, is our temptation to put all of our proverbial eggs in the basket of the nations we inhabit?

Do we look to entities like “Canada” for salvation? Or to anti-colonial resistance to the idea of Canada? For meaning? For identity and purpose?

Are we giving to Caesar what rightly belongs to God?

It seems to me that Christians, of all people, should be least inclined to wander down this track.

We who believe that the ultimate source of our identity, longing, and hope is found in the person and the work of Jesus Christ...

We who believe that we are citizens of an unseen kingdom that advances irrespective of the arbitrary lines and names that we assign to chunks of land and regardless of how bleak or euphoric the historical moment might look...

We who are guided by a vision of *shalom* for all people and all creation, not just those who happen to share our ethnicity or our borders...

We whose identity and purpose come not from a flag but from our status as those who bear God's image and who are called to imitate his Son...

We, of all people, ought to be most inclined to locate our love and longing in something bigger, truer, and more durable than any country could ever be.

Nations are not irrelevant in this divine project, but they are also not ultimate.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.

Can I close with four suggestions for how we as Anabaptist followers of Jesus might think about this on Canada Day weekend?

1. Be grateful for the “overlap” between the values of Jesus and the values of Canada. Celebrate our common humanity. Love our Canadian neighbours as ourselves. Pray for our country and for our leaders.
2. Be open to the stories of those whose experience of Canada has been primarily negative. Listen to our indigenous neighbours—those whose ancestors were steamrolled to make way for European settlers, and who continue to look at this nation very differently than the majority. Listen without condescension, without thinking they should “just get over it,” without imagining that we know their story. And resolve to contribute in some way to doing our part in working toward a more hopeful future.
3. Remember that as citizens of Christ's kingdom, our primary allegiance is not to Canada but to Jesus. It may not always feel like it, but you have more of a bond with an Arab Christian worshiping in Palestine or a Mennonite Christian in the Congo or followers of Jesus in China, India, America, Brazil, and every other tribe under the sun, because of your shared allegiance to the Prince of Peace.
4. Don't look to politics to do what we're called to do as a church. The kingdom of God cannot be legislated into being. It is not Canada that has been given the task of living as Sermon on the Mount people, it is the church. If we're tempted to complain because the nation of Canada is not enacting our values, pause and ask yourself, “What am I doing, in my own little sphere, to enact these values?” The kingdom of God does not come with waving flags and parades and the flexing of

muscle. It is small, unobtrusive, easily ignore. Like a mustard seed. It is determined, faithful, willing to suffer, and uncompromising in hope, because it trusts the Lord of history with the future of all the nations of the earth.

It is a gift to live in this nation, Canada. It is a greater gift to be loved with the everlasting love of Christ and compelled to extend this love beyond any geographic or political boundaries.

Our citizenship is in heaven, the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 3:20. This does not mean that our heads are in the clouds and we're just biding our time here on earth until we get evacuated to heaven.

It does mean that the politics of heaven—a politics of love that transcends the tribalism that comes so naturally to us—are meant to get into our hearts and minds and extend out into this world that God loves so dearly.

Thanks be to God.

