



LESSONS IN LIVING

Insights from the Mystics

“Part 5: Render Unto Caesar”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
July 5, 2026

Scripture Reading Luke 20:20–26: *(The Inclusive Bible)*

So they bided their time by sending spies, who pretended to be righteous in order to entrap Jesus by something he said. Then they would turn him over to the power and authority of the governor. So the spies asked him, “Rabbi, we know that what you say and teach is right. You show no partiality; you teach the way of God truthfully. Is it proper for us to pay tribute to Caesar or not?” Jesus saw through their deceitfulness and said, “Show me a denarius. Whose picture and name are on it?” They said, “Caesar’s.” He said, “Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. Give to God what is God’s.” They were unable to find fault with his public statements. And they were so in awe of his answer that they fell silent.

Sermon

It's a very strange time in our nation's history. And you can't really blame anybody for getting depressed about this. Of course, if you're MAGA, this doesn't make any sense. You know, what's so bad about racism and sexism and homophobia? But if your heart is bigger than that, then in addition to caring about other people, you know you also have to challenge the injustice. You have to talk about it. And that may seem unloving.

Originally this wasn't going to be a part of the mysticism series, but I think that's a good challenge because we need to be both. We need to be deeply spiritual. We need to find the place in us that is beneath the storm, that is there for us no matter what's happening. But love also has to actually help people. It needs to engage in the world. And this is a very difficult time right now. But I think our passage today is very topical for St. Andrew's.

Jesus is going along and there are spies that have been sent. Now that's kind of familiar for us, isn't it? We have people from the religious right who are coming online and looking to trap us in any mistake or poor, poorly stated phrase. According to the text, they wanted to get Jesus in trouble with the governor. We got that one checked too. *(Laughter)*

Have you ever thought about that phrase in the Apostles' Creed, "*suffered under Pontius Pilate?*" When people say religion shouldn't be political, then what in the heck is that doing in the tradition? How could you talk about our text today and not address the mistreatment of innocent people by the powers that be?

I think the reflecting pool is a good apocalyptic sign of what is happening in our world. Where you have something that's not really a big issue for most people, but somebody makes it a big issue, gets a lot of funding for it, and then changes the rules where the person's cronies are the ones that are going to benefit from it and they're unskilled. The essence of the MAGA movement is dishonesty, and second is incompetence. So, they decide to *fix* the reflecting pool, they screw it up and blame other people. That's the MAGA movement kind of in completion. And even as we love and support the people that are caught in that nightmare, we *have* to challenge them, and we *have* to protect other people from them.

So, Jesus looks at the trap they've laid for him. If he says that you shouldn't pay taxes to Caesar, he'll be arrested. If he says you should pay taxes to Caesar, he'll lose credibility. It looks like a perfect trap. And if you have a friend who's MAGA, you know that conversations are filled with those kinds of mousetraps, trying to catch you, trying to gaslight you. And you're not doing anyone a favor by pretending like that's not happening. It may seem like that, but we've got to break that trance. We've got to love each other enough to tick each other off speaking the truth.

There are those who believe you're not really patriotic unless you're willing to lie for the United States. You need to lie about the past; you have to lie about slavery. But if you love America, why would you have to lie for it? If you love America, you can love the faults, you can pledge to do better, but to be honest about what really happened in the history of this nation I think is pivotal for the healing of the world.

I don't think I've ever told this story before. Probably if I told it in completeness, it would be too long for a sermon illustration. The first Christmas I was here, there's a very strange man who brought his mother to our Bible study. And he shows up at our Christmas pageant, and the kids are doing the three wise men and the Mary and the baby Jesus. And I'm brand new to this church and, you know, trying to have everybody like me. (*Laughter*) But this very strange man comes up to me and whispers "*we're killing children just like that in Central America.*" And I think, this guy's crazy. I've got to go to the other side of the parlor, which I did, very courageously. (*Laughter*) He comes over and tells me some other horrifying things.

Now again, after Seminary, I was clueless politically. I thought I didn't *have* politics because I had the politics of the culture. I was white, male, Christian. So, what I thought of as the status quo was my own privilege. And I didn't realize the violence I was doing other people because it didn't show. I was looking through my own prejudice and couldn't see what I was doing.

So, I just keep kind of moving around. And by the way, this was John Stockwell who was found dead last week. He was a CIA agent, and wrote a best-selling whistleblowing book. I don't know if it's best-selling, but it was a whistleblowing book called "*In Search of Enemies,*" talking about US foreign policy. How much of it was about protecting US businesses and how little of it was about bringing democracy or justice.

I still didn't believe him. I never got a chance to tell him what a difference he made in my life. But I was going to lunch a couple years later with a missionary who was a Quaker missionary who had also been in Central America. So, she was talking about something else, and I just mentioned this crazy guy who said we were *killing* people in South and Central America for business purposes. And her eyes welled up with tears, and she said, "*It's true.*" And all of a sudden, that big crack opened in the bubble I'd lived in my whole life. All of a sudden, I realized I was associated with violence I had *no idea* about. I was connected to evil actions until I started speaking up and resisting it.

This is the kind of background our text is addressing today. How do you mix inner peace and this kind of mystical joy and trust in the life process with the actual political situation you find yourself in? Is there any way to marry those two things together? I think Jesus is saying "*Yes.*"

We talked about the trap. The way he gets out of it is to say, could I see a coin? They bring the coin of the day. This was before Trump, you know, crypto. (*Laughter*) They say, "*whose image is on the currency?*" Caesar. Now it looks like he's completely dodging the issue. Then, "*give what belongs to Caesar to Caesar, give what belongs to God to God.*" But I think we're not hearing the punchline. *If* a coin has the image of Caesar, and so that belongs to Caesar, what has the image of God? Where does the image of God exist? For the Jewish people, it was human beings. For the Stoics, it was human beings.

Donald Trump this week said that America is a culture of England, Israel, Greece, and Rome. I don't know Donald Trump's expertise in Greek and Hebrew and Latin. (*Laughter*) My guess is he was exhausting his knowledge base. But in *those* cultures, the image of God represented human reason, and it represented human creativity.

What it meant was that the universe is controlled by some kind of patterning. It may be a god who controls everything, or it may be the nature of the universe. But either way, you are an expression of what they called the "Word," the Logos.

The fact that you can do math in your head is very strange if you look at the universe. Look at the solar system. Look at the galaxy and realize that your head can do mathematics, which means that's got to be embedded in reality itself. That nature within things. You are an expression of that. You are a child of that.

So, then Jesus says, "*Render to Caesar.*" What does that mean? We owe something to government. We owe something to our city, to our families. So that's *part* of the equation, but it's not the *heart* of the equation.

Socrates used to say when he was asked where he was born, he wouldn't say, "*I was born in Athens or Greece.*" He would say, "*I'm a citizen of the universe.*" And what he was referring to is this human nature that carries intelligence and creativity with it. That's what it meant to be an offspring of God. When Jesus talked about being Son of God, I don't believe he was just talking about himself. I think he was trying to put you in touch with your own roots and to say you are more important than anything that's happening to you. And even if you're surrounded with storms, you come from a depth that is beyond those storms.

Did you read in the paper this week that one of the MAGA politicians said that we need to shut down immigration, and it'd probably be a good idea to cover the Statue of Liberty with a bedsheet for 10 years and maybe replace the torch with a stop sign. Now those are the ones that say you hate America. The ones who don't want to hear the motto of the country, *E Pluribus Unum*.

I did a post this last week talking about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and somebody said I was a socialist. In a country where you can't get a livable wage, where it's the only one of the 38 developed countries that doesn't have healthcare for its citizens. I think communism is the last thing we need to worry about. I think it's kind of stupid to think a country tottering on plutocracy needs to worry about worker rights, needs to worry about healthcare getting imposed on them.

So, there are people who believe *they* are the true Americans. They believe they are the true Christians. And they think that you're an inferior version of these things. And what I want to suggest is that's a crock. You don't hate America just because you want to be honest about the history of America. You don't hate America because you want to include the voices that these people want to exclude. You don't hate America because you refuse to take up a first-century version of morals. Howard Zinn put it this way. He said,

"If patriotism were defined not as blind obedience to government, nor as submissive worship to flags and anthems, but rather as love of one's country, one's fellow citizens, as loyalty to the principles of justice and democracy, then patriotism would require us to disobey our government when it violated those principles."

America began as a revolution. America as an institution, as an empire, violates that revolution because it was a revolution of the human spirit where America was dedicated as a proposition that all people are created equal, that we were the city on a hill, which MAGA is trying to turn into a gated community. You don't hate America because you refuse to give up on the American dream, and you refuse to believe the lie that the American dream was about money.

The last thing I want to point out from our text today is I think Jesus is trying to help people who are going to go through a *really hard* political time realize that their highest duty is not to win a struggle, is not to vote red or blue, but to be fully human. Because until that happens, there won't be the foundation for radical change. You being a human being is the most radical thing you can do these days. Don't let a sense of powerlessness minimize the incredible gift you give humankind just by being the candle that's still burning in the middle of midnight. You change the world when you refuse to be anything less than human.

America's problem is just not MAGA. Democrats have betrayed the American dream as well. When James Carville said, *"It's the economy, stupid,"* he's since repented, but it's a little late. So now it's like, would you rather have a President that lies all the time and a good economy? Of course, we don't have really either. *(Laughter)* The MAGA program is to destroy the middle

class and replace it with plutocracy. If it doesn't make sense to you, look at it in those terms and it will all make all kinds of sense. But the Democrats share in the blame. Incredibly so.

What Jesus is saying is none of that has to neutralize the importance of your life. None of it has to neutralize the joy that you have in your time on this planet. The most important human beings have come at the hardest times. So, the fact that we find ourselves in a very hard time does not mean that we don't have the option of living very important lives. To refuse to give up on the image that's within you, whether it's an image of God or of this creative pattern of the universe, is really irrelevant, isn't it? The point is whatever creative principle has brought things into being is the core of your being. And if you think about it, you realize that's not something that you have to really make a whole lot of assumptions to believe. So, living according to your first principles, refusing to hate, refusing to lie, these are gifts you give the world even if they don't seem important to you at the time.

This is my summary of what I hear Jesus saying, and as always, feel free to disagree. There'll be more food for me in heaven. *(Laughter)* Okay, that was a joke. I don't know why I keep putting my neck in the guillotine of the religious right listening to them.

You are the visible image of the invisible creativity which has brought the universe into being. You are either a child of God or a child of the stars, but either way you are a citizen not of any one nation but of the whole universe. It is important to give your gift to your State but never choose property over persons. Never choose patriotic lies over the truths of our common humanity. Never choose your nation over your human family. You can and should serve others, but you should never give your soul to anything less than the common good. Your highest duty is to be fully human.

Well, let's take a moment for you to think about how you would understand these words.

Benediction

Rev. Babs Miller

As we all go out continuing to try to keep our justice vigil strong and intact, may I remind each and every one of you that each of you is a child of that wonderful spirit of love that we sometimes call God. We also call by many other names. And that spirit knows when you skin your knee or your heart. That spirit knows when you admire a butterfly or cry in the darkness. So go out into this wonderful creation and tell the whole world that they are loved just exactly as they are.

Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go and laugh and play in the fields of grace and love. Go in peace. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

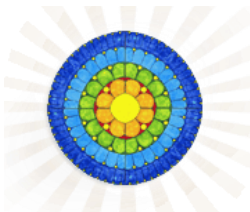
Our Vision Statement

St. Andrews will be a church that celebrates and lives Christ's universal love in the modern world.

Our Mission Statement

The mission of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church is to learn and teach the radical and universal love of Jesus Christ by:

- ❖ Nurturing individual spirituality and growth*
- ❖ Fostering a community that shares and celebrates the circle of life*
- ❖ Providing space and time for personal and communal reverence*
- ❖ Championing the cause of human-kind and courageously acting to overcome injustice*



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