

When the famous bank robber Willie Sutton was asked, "Why do you rob banks?" he replied, "Because that's where the money is." It's an obvious answer and it's one we should take into the way we express our faith.

I understand the United Way in the Rochester region is very successful at raising money; in fact, among the most effective in the nation. It raises close to 10 million dollars a year for local programs and charities. 10 million dollars a year is a lot of money. And if you don't think so you can let me have a couple million when you have some to spare. It is an impressive amount of money and a great accomplishment! Especially during a time of economic stall or recession this is quite an achievement. A lot of good happens every year with those dollars.

The thing is, while 10 million dollars is a lot of money it pales by comparison to the amount of tax dollars that are spent in Monroe County on similar programming. According to the folks at The Children's Agenda, Monroe County spends approximately \$350 per year on poverty and childhood development. That \$350

million includes the cost of the schools. Still though, you get the point. Why do you rob banks? Because it's where the money is. If you want to make a difference you should focus on where the money is.

Giving to the United Way, and even giving to the church for that matter, is a great and wonderful thing to do. I encourage it greatly! But if you want to make a real difference in the world you have to focus on where the money is. Where is the money? In taxes.

I think I am correct in assuming that the single biggest thing you put money into, the single biggest thing that consumes the value of the labor of your life, is paying taxes. Now, we get a lot of value from our tax dollars: defense, a justice system, infrastructure, social programs, regulations and the like. I'm not going to try to preach on what the tax rate should be or how much government regulations should be, but it's Memorial Day weekend and let's remind ourselves of our fundamental rights as Americans.

Thousands of people have given their lives over centuries to give you the right to have a say about how your tax dollars are spent. You not only have the right to vote to determine

your leaders, you also have the freedom to speak your mind, and to advocate for what you want done in government. I'll tell you this, if you don't say how you want the government to do things someone else will.

This is more than just a duty as an American citizen. I hope you can also see it as part of a holy calling. In the second reading from Romans 8 we read that the whole creation is groaning as if in labor pains; giving birth to the future it will become. Now I'm not a woman and I have no idea what labor pains look like. As a guy I do know that it's not wise to pooh pooh how much child birth hurts a woman. You make fun of a woman in labor at great risk to your personal safety. But you get the image. Creation is groaning and straining to become what it is to be. It is painful. It wants to give birth to a new and better reality, God's reality.

That is not something that is going to be accomplished by us sitting around in this room sending up prayers of righteousness. We are wrong if we think showing up here once a week and going through religious motions to please God and putting money in the offering plate will fix the world.

How is the world fixed? Let's look at it this way. Who gets the last word in every worship service? Do I? Nope. You do. And what is the final word you get to say as the service comes to its end? "God's work. Our hands."

The biggest challenge I face as I work to create these weekly worship services is to make them relevant to the Monday through Saturday reality that you live. Sometimes that's not too hard. Sometimes it's nearly impossible. I won't ask you to raise your hands, but how many of you actually understood the gospel reading for today? Not many of you would be my guess! If you think about it hard enough and study it with a commentary by your side you are certainly smart enough to figure out what it means. But even if you do figure it out that doesn't mean that it will fit into your life.

Let me say it differently. The Bible is full of stories. Jesus teaches mainly by stories. But if those biblical stories do not connect to the story of your life nothing has been accomplished. You've just wasted an hour of your life. Church is not the hour of the week that you take out of your schedule to worship God. Weekly worship is the time when your life story is reconnected with God's story of creation.

The important expressions of faith are not what happen in here. They are what you do everywhere else and every other day of the week.

Colleague Johanna Johnson writes in her master's thesis, "Hungering for Justice",

"In addition to being baptized Christians, we are also citizens of the world, and these two identities are not mutually exclusive. Just as we have our Christian vocation, we also have a vocation as citizens. Though the world is made up of two distinct "kingdoms" or realms – the spiritual and the temporal – their common ruler is the same God, and the goal of each is the flourishing of all creation. Because of this, Christians' baptismal responsibilities and duties also become civil duties. The Apostle Paul echoes this notion. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul instructs that because civil authority is instituted by God, we should honor it. He then immediately proceeds to state that to love our neighbor is our most important calling (Rom. 13). For Paul, like Luther, honoring civil authority and loving one's neighbor are related, even inseparable. "

So, it's Memorial Day weekend and it's the day of Pentecost. The two things can easily go hand in hand.

Now, I'm not saying that you should take a "Christian" agenda and impose it upon the government. Many evangelical Christian churches try to do that. This is not about imposing your morals on someone else through a legislative process. You can't do that. It's wrong and it doesn't work.

What I am talking about is recognizing where the power is in the world and where the money is. And then exercising your rights as a citizen of this nation and a citizen of the Kingdom of God to have those resources directed in a way that is effective and constructive.

Vote, write to your legislators, know the rules and laws. Don't take the newspapers' or the radio's or the TV's or the internet's word for anything. None of those things are dependable. I see loads of great press releases from our own ELCA and many other churches that never get coverage because they aren't sensational enough. Only dirt and sensationalism gets interest in the press. Remember, Michael Jackson and Walter Cronkite died not all that far apart from each other. But you don't have to guess which one got the most press coverage.

All in all it takes some effort to be an effective Christian and American citizen. But it is not hard. There are many good and trustworthy sources of information you can turn to. Bread for the World is an excellent example of good solid Christian work being done to promote food and sustainable life for people throughout the world. The Children's Agenda in Monroe County is an excellent local group that will not ask you

for money. All they do is look at the \$350 million Monroe County spends on children and poverty issues and asks the question, "Is this money being used in the most effective way or are there better ways?" They aren't asking for more tax dollars. They aren't pushing an agenda. All they do is ask are you using the tax dollars as effectively as possible. Direct them to the most effective programs and cut back support on the ineffective ones. There is not a companion organization in Ontario County, but you can easily get information from the county's offices that will help you see how effective programs are.

By God's grace you have been born anew into his kingdom. Work to spread the effect of that kingdom; for the creation is groaning in labor pains. It is your right and privilege as a child of God and a citizen of this country to be able to do it. Amen