

I once overheard a parent telling their child to do something and the child surprisingly responded, “you’re not the boss of me!” I was careful not to laugh out loud when I heard that response. But inside, I was laughing. I laughed because, not having my own children, I don’t have to worry about dealing with a situation like that. I also laughed because that child learned rather quickly from that parent who the real boss was. To be clear, it was not the child.

That being said, adults perhaps are not very different from children. At a previous parish where I was pastor, I encouraged our parishioners to get involved in the work of FAST – the social justice organization which 40 different congregations of various faiths throughout Pinellas County are engaged in. That organization follows the scriptural mandate to seek justice for those in need. For the past twenty years, FAST has continuously worked on the issue of affordable housing, especially for those families of four in our county making less than \$76,000. To help support the work of FAST I had that parish pay a minimal amount of money in dues – less than \$1,500 – for the training and services FAST provided. The payoff to that investment was and is astronomical.

I have been personally involved in the issue of affordable housing in Pinellas County for almost two decades. At coffee and donuts one Sunday morning after Mass in that parish, a well-known parishioner decided to publicly confront me about that issue. He felt the Catholic Church should never get involved in work like this. He contended that the housing market would

eventually balance out and that affordable housing would become more accessible to the citizens of our county in the months and years to come. Two decades later, it is evident that his prophecy did not come true. In fact, for many families the opposite happened.

I shared with that parishioner that sometimes issues are so great that there has to be an intervention on a larger scale to assist those in need. He strongly disagreed with me and began deriding me in front of the folks who were trying to enjoy their donuts. I pointed out that I don't try to take care of a burglar by myself if he breaks into my home. I would normally call upon the police for assistance. If there was a fire in my home, I would summon the fire department for their help rather than try to extinguish it myself. I reminded him that I'm not the one who treats the water I drink and bathe with so that it is safe. County water utilities does that with great competency for me and for all in our community. If the road in front of my house needs to be repaired, I don't hire the heavy equipment to tear up the road and repave it. Some issues are so large that a broader response from an entire community is needed. I said that's what FAST promotes and works on. I also added that FAST follows a mandate repeatedly found in the scriptures which calls believers to be instruments of God's justice – that is, bringing balance to communities and people's lives when they suffer and are oppressed.

That response didn't appease my worked-up parishioner. At that point, he loudly accused me of stealing from the offertory collection, using that money to pay those dues. I told him our

finance council was aware of this line item in our budget and they supported this work.

His last shot across the bow was his threat to withhold his donations to the offertory until I stopped paying those dues to FAST. Blessedly for me, the Holy Spirit took over at that moment. I said something that I would never have come up with on my own. I simply asked him, “who or what is your God? Is it your bank account? Your economic system? Your political party? Who or what is your God?”

With that he walked out of the cafeteria. I celebrated his departure by grabbing a donut. Those in the cafeteria who witnessed that exchanged broke into applause.

The readings we heard proclaimed at Mass today challenge each of us to answer that same question: who or what is your God? In the first reading from the prophet Isaiah, we hear about King Cyrus. He was the leader of Persia – countries we know today as Iraq and Iran. In the days before King Cyrus ruled, those nations reluctantly took in the Jews who were exiled from their homeland. The Jews were displaced by the oppression, violence, and war which were ravaging their homeland. The people of Persia were not exactly welcoming to the Jews either. They made life difficult for these new immigrants, despite how the Jews had suffered. But something happened to Cyrus.

Something touched his heart. Even though he was a pagan, a non-Jew, he somehow connected with the one, true God. He heard the voice of God through the prophetic words uttered by Isaiah. Moved with compassion, Cyrus freed the Jews and helped them return to their native land – because that’s what

God's command to him was. He even gave the Jews money and resources to rebuild their beloved Temple because he knew that was the center of their lives. Cyrus showed the Jews and shows us just who his God was. Cyrus showed that Yahweh was his God – not his power or his money.

In today's gospel, Jesus is confronted by two distinct and contrasting groups of people – the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees were against the Roman occupation of Israel. The Herodians supported everything Roman. While these two groups were normally pitted against each other, they teamed up and took on Jesus whom they saw as a threat to the Jewish religion and a threat to Roman rule.

Jesus clearly understood their strategy to undermine and betray him. He didn't get drawn into the trap they tried to lay before him. If Jesus responded that they should pay the tax, he would be showing himself as aligning with the Herodians and the oppressive Roman occupation of Israel. If he told them not to pay the tax in support of the Pharisees, he would have been brought up on charges of sedition against the empire. So Jesus offers that famous and regularly quoted line, "give to Caesar what is Caesar's; and give to God what is God's." With that response, Jesus reminds his audience and each of us that God our Father is to be first and foremost in our lives. Everything else is secondary.

Kingdoms will pass away. Nations might be destroyed. Alliances become frayed and fickle in time. Even relationships can waver or can end. There is one thing that lasts, however. That is our God.

Today is the day for each of us to align ourselves with what is most important – our God and his Church. When we make God first in our lives, everything else comes together. No war, no government collapse, no crisis can take us down when we stand first with Christ.

Today and every day we must ask ourselves, “who or what is our God?” May our answer be the Triune God revealed as Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit; and may that not only be our answer, but what directs and drives our lives in all things.

Amen? Amen!