

Genesis 1: 26-27; 5: 3; 9: 6-7
2 Corinthians 3: 17-18
Matthew 22: 15-22

Icons and Epigraphs
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“Whose picture is that?” I am sometimes asked this question when people come to my house and see an oil portrait of a teenager on the wall or a photograph of a man in his 50’s, or one of the many photos that are on my refrigerator. And I’ll say, it’s my mother, or my father, or one of my children as an infant. And remarks might be made about family resemblance – how they thought the portrait was of my daughter, not my mother.

In the early stories of the Hebrew tradition, found in the book of Genesis, we read several times about image and likeness. The first two humans carried the image and likeness of their Creator. Adam’s third son, Seth, carried the image and likeness of his father. And one of the first ethical statements we find, made as the rainbow after the Great Flood was still in the sky, was “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.” This concept of the image of God is interesting, because, for the most part, the ancient Hebrews were extremely careful to avoid images or icons or representations of the divine. But still they believed that there was a family resemblance between God and humans, and therefore between each human and another.

In the Babylonian Talmud the ancient Rabbis wrote and taught: “[The creation of the first human alone] was to show forth the greatness of the Supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He. For if a man mints many coins from one mold, they are all alike, but the Holy One, blessed be He, fashioned all humans in the mold of the first human, and not one resembles the other.” (Babylonian Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin Folio 38a) In such words, with such attempts at comparison, do we puzzle out the mystery of spiritual relationship.

When we come back down to earth, though, to the nitty-gritty of life as we know it, where deep philosophical thought comes crashing against political, economic and social realities, we find disagreement and conflict and danger. Such was the situation in the Temple at Jerusalem in the last few days of Jesus’ life. This was no place and time for a calm exchange of ideas. The conversation we read in the 22nd chapter of Matthew depicts a life and death conflict.

In the United States we often speak of the separation of church and state, and this Matthew passage is often thought to support this principle. It gives us a framework for thinking of civic responsibilities and religious responsibilities as totally separate things. But remember that this is a modern concept. A Jew of the first century would never imagine a clean, clear separation of his or her life into political and religious areas. All of life was informed by allegiance and devotion to God. And I think that it is a mistake to equate “Caesar” with “the state,” with our democratic form of government. AND I am pretty sure that we cannot equate “God” with “the church.” What tools can we use to understand the conversation in the Gospel of Matthew?

First, the setting. Matthew tells us that Jesus is in Jerusalem, having arrived in the Passover season, accompanied by a noisy crowd waving palms. It is a tense time. Roman soldiers are everywhere, aware that the Jewish inhabitants and pilgrims are feeling restless. Meanwhile, the Temple leaders were nervous, treading a fine line between cooperation with the Romans and the varied religious sensibilities of Pharisees, Sadducees, peasants and revolutionaries. Into this cauldron of unrest comes Jesus, healing the blind and the lame, teaching in the Temple, telling parables, answering questions from the crowd. He is in a very dangerous spot.

Then, the players in this conversation. The Pharisees, devoted observers of Jewish law, team up with the Herodians, Jews who have compromised their faith by allegiance to Herod and to Rome. This is odd in itself. These two groups are natural enemies. The fact that they are cooperating makes clear that they are all made uncomfortable by Jesus. They ask, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" There is no way that Jesus can answer without making someone angry. He is either a patriot or a collaborator. In his reply, Jesus first makes clear that he knows that this is a set up, a test. Then he asks for a coin, a denarius, the coin specifically required for paying the poll tax or head tax to Rome. A denarius of that time would have an image of the emperor Tiberius, with the epigraph or caption, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the god Augustus, and high priest." Both the image and the words were blasphemy to a faithful Jew. Probably the Pharisee would not even be willing to touch it: it must have been the Herodian who held it out for Jesus' inspection. Producing the coin is a demonstration of guilt, the sin of idolatry. They have just broken the first and second of the 10 commandments. They have shown their allegiance to an unjust and oppressive empire. But Jesus doesn't stop there, he offers a suggestion which is actually a question: "Give therefore to the Caesar the things that are the Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." The students of the Pharisee and the Herodians melt away, "amazed" as the text says, unwilling to engage Jesus in conversation any longer. Jesus' "simple" sentence is ambiguous. But the ambiguity of the words is not just a clever evasion of the trap. There has got to be more to this story than cleverness and evasion. Jesus is not merely clever. There is something to be learned here

OK. What belongs to Caesar, and what belongs to God? Jesus seems to be saying that a coin with the emperor's image and title on it may logically be given back to that emperor. That, after all, is why it was minted in the first place. And why would anyone want to hold on to that engraving of a dictator anyway? Surely you don't want to claim such a thing for your own, collect more of them, give it pride of place, put it on your refrigerator, or ally yourself in any way with all that it stands for. Give it back, let it go.

But when the second half of the suggestion is added the suggestion becomes more ambiguous. Did he mean, "Pay your tribute tax to Caesar, and your temple tax to God?" Or, "Everything belongs to God, the creator of the universe." If the latter, what is left to be given to Caesar? Nothing. But the text itself provides no clue as to what was meant.

This gives us the opportunity and the challenge to figure out what all these things are. What do you think Jesus means? What things in our world are Caesar's and what are God's? How does our faith shape our decisions – economic, political, social, charitable, and everything else? I imagine that there are as many answers out there in the pews as there are people.

"Give back to God the things that belong to God's" is a much more powerful bit of teaching from Jesus than just accepting a financial structure that pays for roads and the military and all the

other things that Rome or Washington might provide. He says, remember whose image is stamped on your heart, and on the hearts of those around you. Remember and then give back.

Here we give God praise, through music and prayer, because we understand God as the source of all love and life. We start with gratitude, but then we realize how much we can give to God through giving to each other. So we look around for those opportunities.

Because we understand God to be the source of comfort and consolation, we give each other comfort, through prayer shawls and visits and kind words and casseroles. Because we understand God to be the source of wisdom, we nurture each other through listening and teaching. Because we understand God to be a “lover of justice” we challenge each other to seek justice outside these walls. Because we understand God to be a forgiving God, we hasten to seek and offer forgiveness. Because we understand that God has a preferential option for the poor, we open our hands in generosity. Because we see ourselves as made in God’s image, we honor and respect each one we meet, in all our rich variety. There is no government nor any non-profit that offers this scope of motivation and reward, no other place that offers the depth of spiritual, intellectual, practical and communal challenge.

Understanding humanity to be created in God’s image gives us another handle on Jesus’ words. Caesar minted a lot of coins, with that image of himself, and expected to get them back again. So what has God made that should be returned to God’s possession?

We are carrying God’s image around, not in our pockets, but in our souls. You could say that we are God’s coins. This story in the Gospel of Matthew helps us to understand that giving is about more than dollars and cents, more than a tax, more than the price of admission. Our worship includes, in the words of our local church covenant, the consecration of “our time talent, substance and influence.” We see these things as God’s tools in the world. We work out what they may mean every day,

Jesus has given us the insight that even an oppressive government or society cannot keep us from devotion to the God whose spirit pervades creation and dwells within the human heart. There is a lot of freedom in this insight: freedom to explore the riches of divine generosity. We are also given the freedom to discover our personal expression of response to this, our personal expression of being created in God’s image, not Caesar’s.

I love this church because it is a place that gives us both direction and freedom. And because I can see the beauty of God’s image in each one here. How can I **not** rejoice in that? And so when you walk into this sanctuary, or into the parish hall, or into the many places where we live out the image and epigraph of our creator, maybe people will ask, “Whose picture is that?” They will see the family resemblance that has blessed us with holy possibility and promise. Amen.