

“Whose image do you bear?” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
October 22, 2017 Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 22: 15-22

Let us pray: **Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.**

How many times have you heard this scripture read? For many of you, many times. And it has probably been used in a stewardship sermon telling you to give to the church. Even though it's time for you and me to consider our pledge to the church for next year, today, I want us to consider these verses from a different perspective.

First, let's place these words of Jesus' in the context of where Jesus was and what was going on when he spoke them. This story of Jesus' encounter with the religious leaders takes place during Jesus' last week on earth. Jesus entered Jerusalem that week, triumphantly, riding on a donkey surrounded by people praising him. The next day, Jesus cursed the fig tree, was questioned about his authority, offered three parables that warn those who assume that God is on their side, told today's story about paying taxes to the emperor. Jesus was questioned about the resurrection of the dead, responded to a question about the greatest commandment, and talked about the nature of the Messiah. Finally, Jesus denounced the religious leaders, lamented over Jerusalem, foretold the destruction of the Temple, and talked about the final judgement. That second day was indeed a busy day!

The scripture I read takes place during that busy second day in Jerusalem. Two adversaries, the Pharisees and the Herodians, try to trap Jesus by asking him what they believe to be a political question: whether or not to pay taxes to Caesar.

Much like the Republicans and Democrats of today, the Pharisees and the Herodians were adversaries. If you can say Republicans are for less government, the Pharisees were against Roman occupation of their country. If you can say the Democrats want federal programs, the Herodians were a group who wanted the Roman occupation to continue and wanted to keep Herod, the ruler, in power. Although the Pharisees and Herodians objectives were the absolute opposite, in today's story, the adversaries joined together to fight a common enemy - Jesus, the perceived trouble maker.

Another interesting side note of this story: the Pharisees didn't carry Roman coins because they bore the blasphemous image of Tiberius Caesar with the inscription that he was divine. Yet, the Roman coin was shown to Jesus while the Pharisees were standing the Temple. In the sacred space of the Temple, the Pharisees possessed an idolatrous image. The Pharisees so wanted to trap Jesus that they broke their own rule – actually, God's rule.

The Pharisees asked Jesus a question that they thought would trap him. This tactic is not new to our world today. Last Fall, during the Presidential campaign, there were plenty of questions asked that were intended to trap the one being questioned. Likewise, the Pharisees and Herodians thought Jesus was trapped by their question until he gave his answer: **Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.**

Is Jesus' answer an affirmation of Christian compliance to governing authorities? Is Jesus' answer confirming that God and politics should be kept separate? Is Jesus saying that religion is a matter of the heart and that we shouldn't care about mundane things like money?

As much as we'd like to use this Bible story to determine Jesus' attitude about taxes or answer any of these other questions, Jesus has a much bigger concern for us to consider.

Jesus is telling us, and those who questioned him, that all, that everything, including you and me and all we own, belong to God.

At times, we wonder if we don't belong to our government. The taxes we pay, the red tap we must endure at times. Maybe you feel like you belong to your job or your material possessions or to your family obligations.

Who do you and I really belong to? Look at a person near you. What inscription is on him or her? Genesis 1: 26 say that we are created in God's image. We bear God's image. That's the inscription on all of us.

In this story from Matthew, Jesus was telling the people of his day that they belong to God. The same applies to us today. We belong to God. Isaiah 43:1 quotes God as saying: **I have called you by name, you are mine.** Jesus said that God knows you so well that even the hairs on your head are counted. God gives us our life, our talents, time and wealth. Each person is made in the image of God and bears the mark of the divine. We do not belong to anyone or anything else but God.

Now this mindset that we belong to God and all that we have belongs to God is foreign to our culture. Most people think they belong to themselves and make decisions to benefit themselves. That's not what Jesus is saying in today's story. We belong to God. So, put aside our society's mindset and adopt God's way that you and I belong to God.

Belonging to God means that God will not abandon or disown you. Your family may abandon you or disown you. Your friends may stop talking to you once you express you are a Christ-follower. But God will not abandon you. Jesus made it quite clear that God will not abandon you. He died on the cross to show God's love for you and me and God raised him from the dead to confirm that love.

Belonging to God means that each of us belong to the people of God, to the body of Christ. We have a family, in our case a church family, that provides fellowship and support. We help each other. We care of each other. We party together. We cry together. We pray together. We worship together. Indeed, belonging to God is about relationships and, as many of you know, the relationships you have within this church are very valuable.

Finally, belonging to God means that we give to God what belongs to God: ourselves. How do we give ourselves to God? By living, loving and serving as Christ did while he was here on earth. When we give ourselves to God, we give our lives to others, to serving others.
(PAUSE)

On Monday morning, when you think about rendering to Caesar, paying taxes or your bills, when you worry about your retirement account and what the stock market is doing, remember you belong to God. We may divide our budget, but we must never divide our allegiance.

The coins you and I carry today, bear the image of dead presidents, but each of us bears another image: the image of God. We must never forget to give **to God the things that are God's.**