

**Matthew 22:15-22**

<sup>15</sup>Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. <sup>16</sup>So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. <sup>17</sup>Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

<sup>18</sup>But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup>Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup>Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" <sup>21</sup>They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." <sup>22</sup>When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Matthew 22:15-22, 2017

This gospel lesson

Jesus has finally moved on from the temple where He really has challenged the church leadership, but some more leaders of the church and community come after him.

It is clear that the authorities want to get rid of Jesus and this is an other plot to do so.

It is important to understand who these two groups are. First are the Pharisees and we have heard about them before.

They are the orthodox Jewish teachers who are the political quietists,

in spite of the fact they despise having their country occupied by Rome and paying Roman taxes.

The Herodians however are closely tied to Herod and Rome. They help facilitate and they support Roman occupation and the collection of taxes.

These two groups are normally at bitter odds with one another, but here you see them joined together against a common enemy,

and by joining together in this plot and by asking this question they believe they can get Jesus to offend either Rome or the church,

either having the same tragic results for Jesus.

They really think they have Jesus boxed in when they ask this question:

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?

Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, to God what belongs to God.

Within the context of this story and its political theme coupled with the context of the world we live in a preacher could address the contentious political time we live in,

And truthfully I was tempted to go that way.

While I decided against that, there is something that needs to be said about it,

And it is something I know you all are aware of.

Within the church there are different ways members of congregations live together with their differing points of view.

The model you have chosen is the one I prefer.

In that model everyone has the freedom to believe what they decide is right,

and the responsibility to respect the differing opinion of everyone else in the congregation in grace and love.

In this way together we continue to be the church living the baptized life I spoke about last week and as St. Paul writes:

God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.

Bear with one another...forgive each other...Above all, clothe yourselves with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

This is one thing we can offer the world especially in times like these.

But, I believe the important theme for today really is about identity, and the question of what you do with what you have been given.

Whose image is on the coin? That is the question Jesus asks, and the one that really gets to the point.

In Jesus' day that coin was considered to have been created by Caesar and linked to Caesar and his empire.

Caesar determined it would be legal tender and its value, and should be thought of as belonging to Caesar.

Caesar's image was on the coin.

In Hebrew thought, however, God has forbidden the use of graven images because they might foster idolatry,

and this coin Jesus holds in his hand certainly has for many.

I know some of you can remember when you were young and learning about faith stuff you at least heard about jewelry

and other things that were at least suspect because they could become items of worship.

Not so much the case these days.

Also in Hebrew thought was the assurance from the scriptures, particularly from the creation story in Genesis that God created all things

and that humankind was created in the image of God.

So now Jesus reconfigures the question, intimating but never verbalizing, *What is it that bears God's image?*

Earlier in Matthew, Chapter 6, Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters,

Leaving us all to decide and choose, what belongs to whom?

When he says, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's,

we want to hear him describing two discrete parallel duties that can be discharged simultaneously,

so as to preserve our good standing as citizens of both civic and “Faith-based” communities

as if, there is a place for everything and everything has its place.

But Jesus isn’t doing that at all.

He is saying that Caesar, our government, any organization you may hold dear or whomever, can stamp their image on coins or anything they want,

but the coin of the realm of our flesh and blood is the image of God.

What is rendered to God is whatever bears the divine image,

and every life is marked with that inscription, that icon of the One who is its source and destination.

The inscription, the icon is the love of God, cross of Christ received in your baptism.

It is God who created you in His image and created all you have.

To whom do you belong?

To whom do your things belong?

You bear God’s likeness. You are God’s image.

But you lose sight of that.

You lose sight because unlike the coin in our gospel lesson that bears the clear image and title of the one from whom it comes, namely Caesar,

you do not bear such a clear image of the one who created you.

You get to be like a worn out dollar bill that is hard to read.

You are supposed to be recognized as God's people. But that image wears off because of what happened in Chapter 3 of Genesis;

humanity's fall into sin.

Because sin came into the world you bear only a distorted resemblance of God rather than the pure likeness you were created with.

So God fixed that problem also.

He has marked you with a new sign of His likeness, with a new sign to remind you to whom it is that you belong;

His Son Jesus Christ.

That sign is the sign of the cross you bear on our foreheads. It is the sign you received when you were baptized;

when you were forgiven the sin you are conceived into,

when you received the Holy Spirit and were reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life.

This is an unusual sign, this cross.

The world looks for the sign of God in glory and victory, but the sign of God you bear, the cross,

is **the** sign of the weakness, suffering, suffocation and death that Jesus will face within days of this encounter with the Pharisees and Herodians.

There are many things going on in the world these days that bear no likeness or image of God.

There are many things that have no explanation other than evil at work in the world.

You can see it all around. I don't have to point it out to you.

You cannot see any purpose that God may have in much of what you see or experience, and that is because those things are not of God.

And yet, every person and everything was created by God, loved by God and redeemed by God.

I am reminded, and I remind you, that even in the midst of this worldly kingdom God calls you back to where you can see Him;

where your likeness of God can get polished up, where you can get photo shopped,

and that is at the foot of the cross that makes no sense to anyone but us who believe in Jesus.

God calls you back here to this sanctuary, a place in, but not of the world.

You can come here and again see the signs of Christ as you walk past the baptismal font when you enter

and dip your hand in the water and make the sign of the cross, and be reminded that you bear that sign yourself.

You can gather around this table of Christ, come into His presence, and receive the meal of His body and blood in the bread and wine.

You can be strengthened and nourished for faith and life, and again be made that clear image of God.