

Made in God's Likeness -- Message for October 22, 2017 Based on Matthew 22: 15-22

Let me set the scene for you for our gospel story from Matthew for today. It's a couple of days after Palm Sunday, the day Jesus is hailed by the people as the Son of David, a prophet, a king, Hosannas were sung to him in the streets as he passed by. The day after Palm Sunday, Jesus 'cleanses the temple' he overturned the tables of the money changers and the sellers of doves for turning the house of God into a sham, a marketplace. Then he spends the next 2 days at this temple, teaching and healing. And again the people—children and adults proclaim hosannas in his name for the amazing things Jesus is teaching and the miracles he is performing.

So, how do you think the Pharisees, the chief priests and the elders of the temple are feeling about Jesus, this upstart of a rabbi? He's interfered with how the business in the temple was done, was putting new ideas into people's heads as to how to live their faith. And you can bet the temple leadership got a cut from the businesses around the temple whose tables Jesus overturned.

So, not only is he challenging the religious status quo, but also the temple leader's financial security and their authority and power over the members of the temple. And he seems to be getting increasingly more support from them. The leadership feels threatened by Jesus, and are looking to neutralize the threat, but Jesus is popular with the people. So the chief priests of the Jewish temple, these Pharisees need more clout on their side, so they go to the supporters of Herod, who was the Roman appointed King of Judea, 'Herodians' Matthew calls them. You have to appreciate that this is really a very strange partnership, Jews and Roman politicians—unheard of! Together they plan to trap Jesus into indicting himself in a very public forum. And even more interestingly, the temple leadership don't go themselves to Jesus, but send some of their own disciples instead.

They pretend to be sincere in their desire to understand: 'Teacher we know you teach the truth about God's will for the people...' --you can almost hear the sarcasm dripping from each word -- 'So tell us, what do you think, is it against our Law to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor or not?' And you know, you have to give them credit, it's a good question! They think they have Jesus between a rock and a hard place, if he says yes, it is against Jewish law --the Law of Moses--to pay taxes-- they have him for insurrection against the Roman government, if he says no, Jews should pay taxes to Caesar, they have for contravening the Law of Moses.

Jesus, 'is aware of their malice', their evil intentions, and he knows where this is going, and so, Jesus, being Jesus, sidesteps the question, and poses to them another question—which gets to the unspoken heart of the matter—the elephant in the room, as it were. Where were their hearts in this matter, what was more important to them and why? He asks for a 'coin used for the tax': And now, Jesus didn't have a Roman coin with him. Jews weren't to have Roman coins, because Roman coins had the image, the likeness of the current Roman Emperor on them—Caesar, the Divine Emperor, Saviour of the People. This truly was the way that the Caesars of the Roman Empire insisted they be thought of, rulers by Divine right! That of course was complete anathema to the Jews—an absolute no-no—only God was

Almighty and Divine, only God was Sovereign, only the Lord God Almighty, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, could be the people's Saviour. To believe and act otherwise went completely against all their teachings. The Jews had own currency—the shekel, which is the currency used by the Temple. Shekels had no likenesses, no images of any one on them. But Roman taxes—which everyone in the Roman empire paid, had to be paid in Roman coin, which is why the temple had money changers, because the Temples couldn't accept Roman coins. The Temple was the centre of Jewish life.

So, Jesus asks for 'a coin used for the tax', they bring him a denarius—a silver coin equivalent to about a day's pay for an unskilled labourer or a foot soldier. Jesus asks whose image, who's title is on this coin? And much like today's currency still has, the coin has the head of the Emperor Caesar on it. Jesus responds: 'Therefore give to the Emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's.' An absolutely brilliant response, the Herodians and the Jews go away amazed. Their plot was foiled.

Give to the emperor the things that are the emperors and give to God the things that are God's. "Now, the Greek word that's translated to 'give' in English... means to 'give what is due by obligation.' " ¹ So it seems pretty clear then, that both the emperor, ie. the government and God have a rightful claim to our loyalty. Over the centuries, this piece of scripture has been used to justify that it is right and good for people to pay taxes to the government, and also to pay their tithe, or a percentage of their income to the Church, for the work of God in our community, indeed around the world. And you know in one way, that just also makes logical and practical sense, without financial support governments and churches cannot do the work they need to do. And arguably, these are institutions created by the people, for the good of all. But I think the point Jesus is making goes beyond that, and gets to the heart of the matter. He's broadening the discussion, beyond simply paying taxes or tithing or donating to charity. He's challenging them to consider the guiding principles, the values that determined how they handled their money, what they did with it. What guided them, as people of God, as people chosen by God to live as a holy people, what determined their decision making around their money? And indeed still for us today, what guides us, we who profess to be Christians, followers of Jesus?

Here's a thought for you from one of my favourite biblical commentators, David Lose. On the Roman coin of Jesus' time as still today on our currency, is the likeness of the leaders of our governments. The Greek word for likeness is *ikon* – the word that Matthew chose to use. So a better translation for "Whose head and title is on the coin" is probably, "Whose likeness is this, and what title?" ² Interesting word Matthew choose to use. Where do we know that word 'likeness' from? Let's go way back to the beginning, to the creation story, Genesis chapter 1. "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...'

¹ Marvin A. McMickle in Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 5 Homiletical Perspective for Matt 22. 15-22, p. 192

² David Lose from "In the Meantime" Weekly blog to which I subscribe, emailed out on Monday October 16.17

I don't know how many of Jesus' audience would have caught that, but I suspect those listening closely to Jesus' word choice would have harkened back to God's initial pronouncement and promise: We bear God's likeness and are therefore made to be more than we sometimes realize. (Yes) we were made in the image and likeness of God, and because we bear God's likeness we are to act like God. Not mind you, like *gods*, those who lord their authority over others for self-gain, but rather like *God* – the One who creates and sustains and nurtures and redeems and saves...no matter what the cost. We are called, that is, to serve as God's agents, God's partners, and God's co-workers, exercising dominion over creation not as an act of power but rather as an act of stewardship and extending to all the abundant life God wishes for all.³

As people created in the image, the likeness of God, living in a world created by God, tasked by God to care for creation, baptized into the life of God's own Son, Jesus the Christ, marked with the cross as Christ's own forever, how do we give to God what is God's—knowing of course that all we think we have dominion over, really is God's? There is no question for us today of giving to Caesar what is Caesar's—we all pay taxes, that's a given in our world today. But, what drives us, what's in our hearts and our minds that determines how we can give to God what is God's, serve as people called by God to do God's work in God's Kingdom? This goes beyond simply how we decide much money we give to church, whether we use the 10% biblical tithe or not—all good and necessary discussions, to be sure. How do the teachings of Jesus open our hearts and minds to live as followers of the ways of Jesus in all aspects of our challenging and complex lives today?

“We hold up the values we see Jesus live, (the promises of our baptisms) we make space for the variety of voices and contributions of our people, we look for God's work beyond our community and the places we normally expect God to be, and we call each other back to God's word and promise and charge that we are made in God's own image and likeness and are therefore called to live in a way that others may detect the family resemblance.”⁴

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³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid