

Sermon for Nov. 19, 2017 – Whose Image Is On You??

Stewardship Sunday, 33rd Sunday in OT, Year A – Texts: Mal. 3:1-4, 6-12; Matt. 22:15-22

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Our gospel reading this morning is found in a particular point in Matthew's gospel. It comes after Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and His cleansing of the temple by chasing out the money-changers and merchants. In response to all this, the chief priests and elders begin to question Jesus' authority in earnest. He's in the Temple teaching. They walk right up to Him and ask Him point blank, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?" Jesus responds with parables. The parable of the two sons where one agrees to do what his father asks – then doesn't, and where the other refuses – then turns around and does. The parable of the wicked tenants, who kill first the slaves – then the son of the owner of the vineyard. The parable of the Wedding banquet, where a proud king kills the invited guests who won't come to his son's wedding banquet and then throws out a guest who'd been pulled of the street just for wearing the wrong robe. This has all been part of a plot to trap Jesus into saying something heretical. In all this, Jesus is showing His audience (and us) what greedy, power-hungry people look like against the reality of God's radically merciful and outrageously gracious love. So, finally, we come to today's reading with the question of taxes and authority. Having questioned the source of Jesus' authority they're now questioning the authority to which Jesus will submit!

Now, before going any further, we need to brush up on some history because it's vital to understanding what's going on here. Now, the question of paying taxes to Caesar back in Rome was more of a question of **idolatry** than it was civic **responsibility**. At the time 85% of the Jews income went to taxes. Much of it went to Rome, but some to the Temple, some to the Levites, some to the towns and villages in which they lived. People were bled dry for their money and were often only allowed to just enough to survive. Most had to go into debt just to make ends meet. Sound familiar? All that said, the issues with paying taxes to Caesar were less about the amount of money than about the coins themselves. You see, the emperor was believed to be divine. Seriously – in fact, one of his titles was "divi filius" which means "the son of god." And the Roman coin, the denarius, was a constant reminder of that. Now, the Israelites were prohibited from having any other god's (you might recall that that was the first commandment) so, even **touching** a coin with the emperor's image was a sin. And yet, their Roman occupiers gave them no choice. Everybody, rich or poor, had to pay taxes. **This** is why there were money changers in the Temple; sinful, unclean, Roman money needed to be changed into pure Temple money. These money-changers, not surprisingly, took advantage of people which is what made Jesus so angry. In any case in this context the Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus. They want to get rid of Him and His disciples once and for all. Yet, the trap that they set for Jesus reveals something and ends up trapping them. This is in **addition** to the fact that these religious leaders would actually have Roman coins on them which is more than a bit troublesome! They attempt to get Jesus in trouble. They do so by making Him choose between God and the emperor. They think they finally have Him. The way they see it Jesus has only one choice, He either denies the one true God or He risks Roman wrath by undermining the emperor's divinity. But the way the Pharisees pose the question reveals something **crucial**. By using God as the bait for their trap to catch Jesus the Pharisees show how badly their own faith is broken. You see, to them faith is merely something to be exploited, a means to obtain power and influence. It was a means by which they could hang on to their jobs and maintain their elite status. Hypocrites one and all they cannot see how truly lost they are. The uncomfortable truth is that the trap into which they fall, is one into which we can **all** fall. Our faith can be broken by the same kind of thinking. In such times our idea of "church" can quickly move from being about faithfulness to our calling to simply maintaining its trappings of the church. It can go from being willing to do the more difficult task of discerning God's will to being tempted to follow our own agendas. It can be about being willing to take the occasional risk to doing that which makes us feel comfortable and safe.

This can happen when God becomes a commodity, just another aspect of our lives rather than its sole focus. Something we reserve for Sunday's only and leave out of our daily living and thinking.

So, when Jesus answers the Pharisees He gives them the thing that they've been waiting for...He makes a statement about giving to God what is God's and to Caesar what's Caesar's. But, the truth is giving Caesar what's his **isn't** the point. Actually, quite the opposite. As much as many preachers have tried to use Jesus' words as reason to encourage people to do their civic duty or to give more to the church, this isn't about what belongs to Caesar and what doesn't. This is about God! That's where Jesus's emphasis is – on God. Give to God what is God's. But there are some unasked questions here. The first and most obvious is this, what belongs to God? The answer is, of course, everything. The entire universe, all creation. Everything and everyone in it! So, even as the Pharisees are using God as a tool, a weapon and a trap for Jesus, Jesus is pointing them back to God. Reminding them of who God is and that everything belongs to God. All things. All of creation. All of life. All power and might. All righteousness and virtue. All grace and forgiveness. All mercy. All faith. Yep, even us and our broken faith belongs to God. But more importantly, giving to God what is God's is NOT really ours to do. Because we cannot give anything to God. And that's the thing that Jesus has caught the Pharisees with. As they try to trap him, as they try to protect the "true" faith of Israel, which just happens to provide them with power, privilege and wealth, Jesus reminds them that God isn't something to control nor is God a tool to use to maintain their position. Rather, God is the one who to whom **all** things belong. And the Pharisees **know** this even when they don't **remember** it. They know it because they pray it at every sabbath and they pray it over and over at Passover:

"Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha'Olam..."

"Blessed are you, O Lord God, King of the Universe..."

King of Everything! And so, giving to God what's God's is truly to be reminded of the God to whom we belong. That he is the God of Kings and Empires, rich and poor, black and white. It's a reminder that the God to whom we belong is the God of life. The God who has sent the Son to reconcile us to God. The Lord God, the King of the Everything, already knows that the faith of Pharisees is broken. He knows that **our** faith is broken and has been since the days of Adam and Eve. So, while the Pharisees trap reveals the object of their faith it's no surprise for Jesus. In fact, our broken faith, is why Jesus is here in the first place! Why He'd ridden into town as a conquering King on the back of a donkey and it's why the Pharisees not long after this will arrest Jesus and curry favor with Rome to get them to crucify Him. But, and here's the thing, the Lord God, King of the Universe is the one to whom **all** things belong...even death. And in death, Jesus' death, is the proof. Here we find that there's nothing that doesn't belong to God. No place where God will not seek us out. No brokenness that surprises God. No brokenness that God cannot fix. And, that there's nothing over which God is NOT sovereign and so, in pointing the Pharisees and us back to God, Jesus is also pointing us from death to life. He's reminding us that the God to whom all creation belongs has promised us and our broken faith resurrection and new life as well. Jesus says, give to God what is God's...But it is God, the King of the Everything, who's giving **us** mercy and life. We live in a culture, in a world, of Caesars. We must be realistic enough to give to Caesar what belongs to him which, in truth, isn't really all that much. Much as he'd like to think otherwise. Which almost makes the exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees moot from the start. Which brings me to back to the subject of the Pharisees unasked questions that I'd mentioned earlier. In commenting on this passage, Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias points out something very interesting. He says that when Jesus said to "give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" the Pharisees should've asked Him: "what belongs to God?" Had they done so Jesus would likely have answered "Whose image is on you?" The answer would've been obvious, as it is now.

Brothers and sisters, as stewards of all that which has so generously been provided for us let's give to God, in whose image we are made now and every day, what belongs to God! Blessed are you, O Lord God, King of the Universe in whom we live, move, and have our being! Amen and amen.