Sermon for Year A, Proper 24
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Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; I Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

“Render unto Ceasar that which is Ceasar’s, and render unto God that which is God’s.”

Today’s Gospel contains one of the most well-known—and arguably misunderstood—quotes in the Bible.

Give to worldly authorities that which is theirs, and give to God that which is God’s.

But how do we know what is Ceasar’s and what is God’s?

Let’s take a closer look. Our gospel for today is set in the last week before Jesus’ crucifixion. First, he makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding before crowds of people, something we now celebrate on Palm Sunday. The next day, he goes up to the temple, where he confronts the money changers, the people who were cheating the pilgrims coming to Jerusalem to worship. Jesus confronts them, overturns their tables, and drives them out of the temple complex with a whip, in what is known as the cleansing of the temple.

And the very next day, after that confrontation, Jesus comes back to the temple. He comes back once again with crowds around him, to teach and preach his message of radical love. By doing this in Jerusalem, in the temple, Jesus was making a statement to both the political and religious authorities. And what we have in our readings today is the first part of their response to the challenge Jesus presented.

The passage tells us that two groups came to challenge Jesus. The first group, the Herodians, were supporters of Herod, the ruler and representative of the Roman imperial power. The second group, the Pharisees, were religious leaders, holding to the traditional laws of Moses. Normally, these two groups were opposed to each other. But they came together on this day to confront what they viewed as a common threat—Jesus.

They challenged Jesus by asking him, in front of his followers, one of those “no win” questions, where no matter what you answer, it will be wrong. Should you pay taxes to the Romans, they asked. Now, if Jesus answered that you should pay taxes to the Romans, he could be seen as siding with the oppressors and against the interest of his many poor and oppressed followers. On the other hand, if Jesus opposed paying taxes, he would be guilty of treason. Truly a lose-lose situation. However, Jesus took another path altogether.

Jesus uses a simple object to illustrate his point—a coin. Holding up the coin, Jesus points out the image of Ceasar on the front, and states that we should render to Ceasar

that which is Ceasars. In other words, those things that look like, that act like, that are in the image of Ceasar, belong to Ceasar.

And those things, those people, who look like, who act like, who are in the image of God, belong to God.

Remember, Jesus' audience included Pharisees who were known for their Torah scholarship. They would have understood, that Jesus was referring here to people, to humans themselves. The first chapters of Genesis lay out that God created humankind in God's own image and likeness.[1] Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, particularly in Isaiah[2] and in the Psalms[3], there are references to humans as being formed by God and in the image of God.

Jesus wasn't getting into a philosophical argument about the relation between church and state—although that seems to be what the questioners wanted and this passage is often interpreted that way even today. Rather, Jesus is driving home his point that we, humans, are made in the image of God—and belong to God. Even those who have lost their way. Even those who were trying to trick Jesus into committing treason with their flattery and treacherous questions.

Jesus didn't fall for their tricks. Instead, he reminded them of where their loyalty should be—to the God in whose image and likeness they were made.

In preparing for today, I read a lot of sermons and commentaries on this passage. Most of them either dealt with the relation between church and state (and there's a lot of disagreement on that topic) or they revealed that we are made in God's image, glory, halleluiah, let's go home.

While I definitely think that being made in God's image is something wonderful, something to be celebrated, I found myself unsatisfied with those messages that ended with this as a great reveal—particularly since we've had that same message since Genesis. It's great to know, it's something we often forget, but it isn't a big surprise.

I found myself asking, what does it mean to be made in the image of God? How can God be visible in me? And how can I see God in others? How can I ensure that I am not distracted by the images of Ceasar, and that I am, indeed, seeing, following, becoming, an image of God? And, for that matter, what is God like?

This question of what God is like, was raised at our seminary discussion on Thursday. The instructor, Rev. Courtney Jones, reminded us that Paul told the Galatians to look for the fruit of the Spirit, those actions that are outward and visible signs of God within us.[4] God is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-

[1] Genesis 1-2
[2] Isaiah 40:18
[3] Psalm 8, Psalm 100
[4] Galations 5:22-23

control. God's image is visible in us when we display these traits, when we exhibit these qualities, when we bring forth the fruit of the Spirit.

At this point in the sermon, it's common to have an exhortation. A place where the preacher calls on us all, to do something, in this case, to go forth into the world in love, to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit. And yes, we should all do that.

But today, I'd like to ask you to do something a bit different. I'd like to ask you to take a few moments to reflect, to consider, to ask yourselves the following questions. When was the last time I acted in love? When was the last time I was filled with joy, when I shared the joy of God with others, when I actually talked, out lout, about God's joy? When was I able to promote peace? When was I patient? When was I kind? How have I shown goodness? How have I been faithful? When was I gentle? How did I demonstrate self-control? Am I polishing that image of God in me? Am I working to show it to the world? Do others see God in me?

Or have I allowed that image to become tarnished? Have fear and doubt, anxiety and exhaustion, covered over that likeness of God that exists inside? Have I begun papering over the image of God with likenesses of human creation—money, power, popularity, acceptance? When could I have shown love, been patient and kind, been generous, yet failed? Those moments may be easier to recall, as we all seem to carry our mistakes at the front of our minds. Yet we know, we have been assured, that we are all made in the image and likeness of God.

These are the questions that have been filling my thoughts, sitting on my heart, as I studied and meditated on the gospel this week. Have I been showing God's likeness in my life? When others look at me, can they see the image of God?

So, as we go out into the world following the service today, I'd like to leave you with this assurance—we are all, each and every one of us, made in the image and likeness of God. We have patience, kindness, and faith within us. We have goodness, gentleness, and self-control residing inside us, waiting to be tapped. We have within us peace, joy, and love ready to burst out. We have that breath of life from God at our very core. It is there, within us.

And God has given us all of this in abundance, not to safeguard, to keep hidden away, but to share with the world around us.

Amen.