

This Sunday's texts:
Genesis 1:26-31
Colossians 3:1-11
Matthew 22:15-22

Whose Image?
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The Gospel reading for today is from the Gospel of Matthew 22:15-22:

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap Him in His words. They sent their disciples to Him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know that You are a man of integrity and that You teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because You pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap Me? Show Me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and He asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then He said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

This is the word of Our Lord. Good morning and greetings in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Today, we're continuing our series through the Gospel of Matthew, exploring the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and how those things don't just drop into history out of nowhere. But rather, they are the culmination and fulfillment of what God has been up to since the very beginning of creation, pursuing those that He created with a relentless, never-quitting love and that in Jesus Christ, through the power of His Holy Spirit, that message has extended across time and space to all people, so that even us today, 2,000 years and 7500 miles away, are being transformed and renewed in the image of our Creator, through our Lord, Jesus Christ, as He transforms hearts and brings the dead back to life.

Yet even in Jesus's day, as it is in ours as well, not everyone was thrilled about the message and ministry of Jesus. So today we have a passage where Jesus has a clash with the powers that be. In His ministry, He had traveled all over the region, healing the sick, casting out demons, comforting the sorrowful, forgiving sins, all the while making grand statements in both word and deed to being the fulfillment of the Torah, the Lord of the Sabbath, the greater than the temple. He was greater than the prophet Jonah or King Solomon. He was claiming to be the very Messiah that the people had waited for.

All that to say Jesus had done an incredible job offending those in power. There was nobody whose claim to power, privilege, and authority that Jesus hadn't offended. So in our texts today, two of those offended groups conspire together in a classic "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" situation.

Jesus found himself in a not-so-friendly conversation with the Pharisees and their disciples, who were the religious elites of the day. They were the religious authorities. The people looked to them for how to honor God in what they thought and did. They were known for their rigid adherence to the rules of Law, so much so that they would even make rules to keep people away from getting close to offending God's Law. We often think of the Pharisees as these rigid, legalistic, and ill-willed people, but I have to believe that it began for them in a place of a desire to honor God and to live rightly. Yet somewhere along the line, they lost their way. They lost the spirit of love and grace of God and built their lives on a foundation of adherence to rules.

Then we have the Herodians. We talk a lot less about the Herodians in church. They come up less often, but they were a group of politically-aligned Jewish people, who would align themselves with King Herod, who was the Roman puppet king in the region of Jerusalem and the surrounding area. He was a constant reminder to the people of Israel that they were not, in fact, a free and autonomous people of God, free to worship as the Lord called them to. They were living under the oppressive rule of Rome. King Herod was, in essence, a constant reminder of the power that Rome flaunted over the people of God. King Herod, a Jew himself, at the cost of betraying his own people, sold out to Rome for the sake of power, prestige, wealth, and influence.

So these groups, who despised each other, conspired against Jesus because they saw that each had something to lose. It cracks me up how they do this. They butter up Jesus. They come to him. They say, "Teacher, You are so wise. You are godly and You always make the right decisions. You don't respect anybody above anybody. You don't play favorites. You always say and do what God wants. So what is your opinion?"¹ They try to build Him up, so that they can knock Him down. Right?

And then they hit Him with a landmine political question. They try to paint Him into a corner with an impossible question. It's kind of like saying, "Jesus, You are so wise and You never make any mistakes. You do everything right and You are really smart, so what is Your opinion - Trump or Biden?" It was a tense and uncomfortable political question and He knew it was a trap. They said, "Jesus,

¹ Matthew 22:16 (in Pastor Joe's words)

what about the imperial tax?? The imperial tax was a tax that Rome would put on the people that it conquered and subjugated. Roman citizens did not pay it, but each and every Jew was responsible to contribute to their oppressor. They understood that this was like taxing the prisoner to pay the jailer. It was a constant reminder to the Jewish people that they were living under Roman rule.

There was no correct answer to the question they asked. If He said, “Yes, it's right to pay the imperial tax,” then He offends the Pharisees and He has betrayed His people. What do you mean? You're justifying Rome's oppression over us. But if He said, “No” to please the Pharisees, then He offends the Herodians, who could arrest him for teaching treason publicly.

There was no correct answer to the way they worded their question. So Jesus refuses to play the game.

I want to make a side note here because I think this might resonate with where some of you are at in your experience as a Christian in this world today. Like Jesus, you are not obligated to respond to bad faith attacks on your Christianity. There's a lot of mudslinging and a lot of dragging of the Christian faith in this world. But when we participate in the mudslinging ourselves, it's far more likely that everyone comes away dirty than we're going to come away with a win.

Jesus doesn't hesitate to call an attack what it is. He doesn't play that game. Now Jesus does something that He actually does really often in the Gospels. You probably noticed it before. Maybe you've been reading a passage in a Gospel and somebody asks Jesus a question and He responds in a way that's like that answer had nothing to do with the question that was just asked. Jesus does, in this instance, what he does so often when people come to him with questions. **He answers the question behind the question.** When the friends bring the man on a mat paralyzed to Jesus, He forgives his sin. It says the problem you have isn't just the paralysis. He deals with that too, but Jesus is in the business of dealing with the question behind the question, getting to the root of the issue.

So here's what Jesus does. He asks for a coin called a denarius and it looked like this. It had Caesar's image on it and it was a common currency in the day of Jesus, equal to about a day's wage for the average laborer. He asked the question, “Whose image is on this coin?” Whose inscription? Now the Greek word for image is actually probably going to sound familiar. There's



almost a one-to-one correlation with the English language with another word. It's the word "icon" which means image or likeness.

Jesus says, "Whose icon is on this coin?" Caesar's image and inscription meant that this coin had worth and purpose only based on the authority of the king, Caesar. It was useful only where Caesar ruled and his rule was respected. That is why this is not a viable currency because no matter how much respect you have for Shaq [a professional basketball player], his icon does not carry that kind of weight in the world we live in. It doesn't mean all that much. But Caesar's did.



But here's where Jesus gets to the question behind the question. You know this word icon appears elsewhere in the Bible. In particular, Jesus is referencing where it appears in the Greek version of the Old Testament, which would have been the version of the text that the common people were most familiar with in Jesus's day. You see, the Bible is filled with hyperlinks², within itself. You come across an idea in one place and it is very common that it is a reference to something that appears elsewhere in Scripture. That's one of the reasons why a deep knowledge of Scripture opens up a world of God's grace to those who encounter and expose themselves to His Word often.

So Jesus is referencing, he's hyperlinking, to somewhere else where this word ["icon"] appears. It is in a reading from Genesis this morning. In Genesis 1:26-27, "So God created mankind in His own *ikona*, in His own image, in His image He created them."

I don't know if you've ever thought about it this way. This is actually the first theologically true statement made about humans in the Bible. This is the first thing that God says about us, is that we were created, in His image. That means that first and foremost, you are created by the word and authority of the Creator of the universe, but that uniquely, in all of creation, you were made in His image.

² A hyperlink is a piece of text, usually on a webpage in the internet, that when clicked, brings you to another text, webpage, or website.

So that's what Jesus is getting at. He says Caesar's image is on the coin, but you have forgotten that God's image is on you. The Pharisees and Herodians try and catch Jesus in a trap with a tricky political question and Jesus comes in with a reminder that they've lost touch. They've lost sight of who they are. They've gotten caught up in politics and money and power games and lost sight of what this life is truly about, that they were created in the image of God with inherent value and incredible purpose. I want to look at those two things a bit.

First, as God's unique creation created in His image, we, you have inherent value, and your worth before God and in God's family is not based on what you do. It is not based on your salary or your grades, your performance in athletics, or your reputation publicly. God doesn't assess your value or dignity based on the things you do. It is *baked* into us from the beginning. It's not based on your political affiliations, your prestige, power, influence, or privilege. You are inherently valuable apart from that. No one can take that away from you. In Colossians 1, it says this, "Once you were alienated from God ... enemies in your own mind because of your evil behavior. But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation."³ You see, in God's eyes, while you were still His enemies, you were so valuable to Him that the broken body and shed blood of His Son was not too high a price to pay for you to be reconciled with your Lord. In God's eyes, you're created in His image and You. Have. Value.

The second is this. You were created with a purpose. You were not an accident or mistake of God. He wasn't careless when He made you. The Creator of the cosmos sequenced your DNA personally. In His wonderful love and divine creativity, not a single bit was out of place. He was intentional and you were created *on purpose*, *with* a purpose.

Now here is my cursory football reference on this most holy of days in America. God did not create anybody to sit on the bench. He created each and every one of us with unique giftings and empowers us with His Holy Spirit, so that we can make a meaningful contribution on the field. He says He's going to work with you and gift you and work through you through His power to make a difference, to build up His church, and to make an impact outside its four walls for the name of His love and justice and His kingdom in a world that is full of injustice, hate, anger, and brokenness. He does not call anyone and He did not create anyone to sit on the bench.

³ Colossians 1:21:22

The most fundamentally true thing about us is that we've been made in the image of God, something that Jesus reminds us of in this passage today. He says to give to Caesar what is Caesar's. That's fine, but remember whose you are and in whose image you've been created.

The image and inscription of the Creator of the universe are etched on your life and nothing can scrub it out. So give to God what is God's. And when you do, you'll find this. You'll find that the One to whom you give yourself has already given so much more for you, that He's giving you His promises, His spirit, new life, abundant life, and eternal life. Most of all, He's giving you Himself wholly and fully and without regret or reservation. So when Jesus's body was broken on the cross and His blood was poured out, the King on a cross so that He could make you His son and daughter, so He can make you His child, remember that that is the King who has put His inscription, his icon on you. So child of God, remember this, that you are His, not as an oppressed subject to be ruled over and exploited, but as a beloved daughter, a beloved son, made in the image of your King. Amen