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Whose image?

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Matthew 22:15-22

In 5th grade, Miss Poole wrote the words “Rights and Responsibilities” on the black board gave our class a civics lesson. She wrote the words in She said that every American citizen had rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom to adopt the religion they choose. But at the same time, she insisted, each of us also had responsibilities to use these freedoms in a way that was equitable and fair. We had many lessons in Miss Poole’s classroom but for some reason this particular one was so important to my 10-year-old self that I remember it vividly to this day.

This memory returned to me as I explored today’s Scripture passage. “Give, therefore, to Caesar, the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” This familiar sentence of Jesus sums up who we are as Christians in much the same way that Miss Poole’s lesson on “rights and responsibilities” did on citizenship so many years ago.

This story in Matthew arrives just as things are getting very tense. Earlier that same week, Jesus entered Jerusalem and was greeted by adoring crowds. Then, riding the wave of this popular support, Jesus enters the Temple and overthrows the tables of the moneychangers. In these two moments, he challenged the both the political powers and the religious powers of the day.

He disturbed leaders of two powerful groups who normally had little to do with each other. First were the Herodians, who closely identified and took

their power and cues from the Roman occupiers. Second were the Pharisees whose allegiance was more clearly bound to the occupied and oppressed Jewish common people. Yet these two groups now worked together to trap this upstart rabbi.

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” It was a clever question. It was not about taxes in general. In first century Palestine, Jews paid all sorts of taxes: Temple taxes, land taxes, and customs taxes, to name three. The tax in question, was a particularly hard one to bear. This was the poll tax Jews paid as a tribute to Rome in order to support Roman occupation of Israel. Jews were thus required to pay a denarius a year to support their own oppression. You can imagine how despised this tax would have been.

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?” It was a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” kind of question. If Jesus answered “Yes, you should pay the tax” the crowds’ adoration would not simply evaporate but would pivot into hostility. If Jesus answered “No, you should not pay the tax” he would place himself in jeopardy with the Romans. This was not a healthy choice to make.

So the leaders think that he’s in their snare.. But Jesus offers an ingenious and inspired response.

Like a good teacher, Jesus asks for a concrete object for the lesson. Does any of you have a coin of the Empire? This coin would be the only possible coin one could use to pay the poll tax. Jesus asks whose image is on it and the dialogue takes new twist. Jesus’ opponents carry a coin not only with a graven image, but also a confession of Caesar’s divinity. Merely by having the coin in your pocket meant, as a Jew, that you would have broken the first two of the commandments. (First: *You shall have no other gods before me.* Second: *You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth.* Exodus 20:2-3)

Jesus, at that moment, could have charged them with being collaborators. He could have charged them with blasphemy. His charge, however, was that they were hypocrites who have lost the likeness of their own religious identity. Jesus tells those who would entrap them that they have lost their memory about whose people they truly are.

This is the first and fundamental message they, and we, received in the Hebrew Scriptures. In Genesis, even as humanity are first being formed we read “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” The Greek word for likeness, *ikon*, is the word used both in the Greek translation of Genesis and is the word Matthew uses here in his Gospel.

A better translation for Jesus’ key question might be “Whose likeness is this, and what title?” One wonders if the Jewish audience would have remembered Genesis’ as they heard “ikon” or “likeness”. If so, they would have been convicted by God’s words at the creation that bear the likeness of God’s. Living into the likeness of God governs all our convictions and commitments.

We are in an election season. What a timely moment for this scripture! Perhaps the question for us today isn’t, after all, whose image is on the coin, but rather whose image is on us. What always gets lost in our conversations about money and politics is that God has made us in God’s image. And whether we are Democrat or Republican or Independent, we are first and foremost made in God’s image, and not these lesser political gods.

We are entering Stewardship season in the church. Now, we may think that how we spend and give our money is our business and nobody else’s. But if we forget in whose image we are made, we may be tempted to think that we are no more than the sum total of our consumption, our possessions or our bank accounts – and it is *they* that tell us what we are worth.

One writer tells the story of going to church in Minneapolis where the pastor put magic markers in the pews one Sunday. After reminding the congregation that all we have and all we are is God's – she invited people to mark their credit card with the sign of the cross. And with that stroke, it became impossible to buy something without also reflecting if this purchase aligned with one's sense of values and God given identity.

I love this idea. I think I am going to try it. Benjamin Franklin may have once said that death and taxes are the only two certainties of this life, I think you and I know better. We are people who vote and people who spend and give money. But we are first of all the people who believe that the One raised from the dead, Jesus Christ, is the one who has shown us that God's image is more powerful and more certain than any other in our lives.