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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, October 22, 2023

Proper 24, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary Track 1

[Exodus 33:12-23](#)

[Psalm 99](#)

[1 Thessalonians 1:1-10](#)

[Matthew 22:15-22](#)

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Imagine a world before each of us had a magic rectangle in our pocket that could take pictures at incredible resolution and store them in an unlimited number.

Remember a time when taking photos meant loading film into a camera. Now go back farther in time. Not that far, really. Before photography became widespread in the 1800s the only way to make an image of something was to draw or paint it. Only a few talented people had the skill to create reproductions of a person or object that really looked lifelike.

The ancient world considered images to have a kind of power that's almost lost in our culture today where it's so easy and cheap to make a picture. That still exists in some cultures. Islamic art refrains from using images of humans or animals in sacred art, so instead sacred places are decorated with magnificent calligraphy and floral and geometric designs.

The Jewish world of Jesus' time was similar in that way: that society took the power of images very seriously. In a world where most societies worshiped Gods that were portrayed by statues and pictures, the people of ancient Israel insisted that God was beyond depiction, and any image was in a sense a temptation to idolatry.

The money changers whose tables Jesus had famously overturned just before the story we heard today were in the Temple specifically to exchange Roman money, which had images of pagan gods and Roman emperors on it, for Temple money which didn't and could thus be used in that sacred place to buy things to sacrifice.

So as Jesus sits teaching in the Temple the stakes are high. The tension between the pagan Roman occupiers and the monotheistic faith of Israel is front and center, and his opponents seek to either get him to oppose the Romans or betray that monotheistic faith.

Jesus' answer is remarkably simple: give to God what is God's and Caesar what is Caesar's. Surely that echoes the two different kinds of money. But we should be cautious about hearing his answer as saying that the economic and political sphere belongs to Caesar and the sacred sphere belongs to God. We modern-day North Americans are used to dividing life into sacred and secular spheres—but that division makes no sense in God's eyes, because the whole world is sacred and belongs to God. And we might ask: if the coin belongs to Caesar because it has his image on it, then what is it that has God's image on it? And here there's a very clear answer from the very first book of the Bible.

In the creation story in the book of Genesis, God says, “I will create human beings in my image, after my likeness”; thus “God created human beings in God’s own image, in the image of God God created them.”

If God’s image is inscribed on us, then what we owe to God is much more than a coin, much more than a tax. God’s claim is on our entire lives—our entire being. Giving what belongs to God means giving our whole self.

Now of course right now we are in our annual pledge campaign when we consider God’s call on our lives particularly in the area of finances. We ask our members and friends of our parish to pledge to our church not primarily as a matter of “funding the church’s budget” or “contributing our fair share.” Instead, we give out of our own spiritual need to give, to set God and the work of God’s kingdom first in our lives, not least by putting that work first in our budgets. The biblical norm for giving is the tithe, a tenth of all our income. But if we are created in the image of God, what we really owe to God is one hundred percent! Our money belongs to God along with everything else in our lives, because as Christians we cannot divide our lives into sacred and secular realms. Of that one hundred percent God has made us stewards, trustees, with the responsibility to allocate ALL of it to God’s work. And God’s work includes that portion that we need to dedicate to providing for our personal needs and those of our families, and it also includes that portion we need to devote to the broader needs of the world.

That’s where the idea of tithing comes back in, not as a rule but as a spiritual practice, not to kick in an obligatory ten percent tax to God but as a sign of our gratitude for the one hundred percent of what we have and are that already belongs to God.

Not everyone can get to the tithe right away. It took Julia and me about the first seven years of our marriage to get there, starting from about 6% of our income and nudging it up over time. There are also those who have enough resources placed in their care that they can give away much more than 10% of their income. The critical thing is that we are acting intentionally to live out the call of God on one hundred percent of our lives.

I've spoken before about a frame that hung on the wall of my college's Episcopal campus ministry: an ornate gilded frame in the style used for Eastern Orthodox icons. When you bent close to see what was in the frame, it wasn't a picture but a mirror. And then in small typewritten letters on the frame was this caption: "You are an icon of the Holy One."

You and I bear the image of the Holy One. Today we come to this table to lift up our hearts, to offer our entire selves, souls, and bodies. Let us indeed render to God what is God's.