

Rev. Berry French; Matthew 22:15-22 Sermon
10.19.14 at Black Mountain Presbyterian Church
“You Are What You Look Like”

Introduction to the text

Today’s Gospel Reading is from the twenty second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew and recalls a loaded encounter between Jesus and some of the Jewish leaders of the day, during the final week of Jesus’ life. Jesus and his disciples entered the holy city of Jerusalem on that original Palm Sunday when the city was bustling with festival crowds and excitement.

According to Matthew, after Jesus entered the city he headed straight for the Temple. Jesus entered the holy Temple in Jerusalem and was so mad that the Temple had been dirtied with commerce and money changers that he flipped over their tables and drove out those buying and selling in the Temple. As you can imagine, such an entrance to town got some attention from the religious establishment. And they begin to plot against him to have him arrested.

Today’s story is their second of four attempts early in that holy week to trap Jesus between siding with the Roman authorities, or siding with those who **opposed the oppressive Roman** occupation – and risk being arrested for sedition.

Text: Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his talk. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.

Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him the coin. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's."

Then Jesus said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard it, they marveled; and they left him and went away.

Sermon

Since our beginning, this country has been trying to figure out and living into the notion of the **separation of church and state**. The separation of church and state has been one of the concepts that has shaped our society – both in how we think about church and how our government functions. It has been interpreted in a variety of ways from lots of perspectives over the years, and I imagine it carries slightly different meanings for many of us gathered today.

It's a sensitive and somewhat intense topic and it always has been. What is the role of the government in our religious life? And what is the role of our religious life in our civic lives or in our government?

I for one am grateful that the state's role in our religious life is limited, and I am ever grateful for the freedom this country was founded on. *Separating the state from the church* makes good sense to me. But on an individual level I'm not sure we should separate the church – or at least we shouldn't separate our faith – from **any** part of our lives.

I do think God cares about how we live **our whole lives**, not just our life on Sundays, or the parts of our life one might classify as religious. Our faith, *if it much of a faith at all*, certainly has influence over the whole of our lives. And so, I think we must ask ourselves: **How do we live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ and how does that effect how we live our lives in the world and how we live as citizens of North Carolina, and citizens of the United States?**

The ancient Jews gathered in Jerusalem two centuries ago to celebrate the Passover were *asking the same questions*: How do we live as faithful people and how does that effect how we live as citizens of a Roman-occupied Israel? Some of the religious authorities of the day gave voice to these questions of the separation of church and state: “Should we pay taxes or not?”

But they have primarily come to trap Jesus. And yet, as he does every time the religious leaders come with a clever, well-planned trap, Jesus turns the question around, exposes their hypocrisy, and addresses the deeper issue.

They have come to trap Jesus in a politically charged issue – there is no safe response. But their question is deeply religious – their language anchors their question in the Torah. “Is it lawful (according to our Scriptures) to pay tax to Caesar or not?”ⁱ

If Jesus argues against paying the tax, then he is guilty of sedition and can be arrested by the Roman authorities. If Jesus answers “Yes, you should pay the tax,” then he loses his credibility with the common Jew and alienates the people who hate the Roman occupation and the oppression it brings.

Jesus sees through their trap and asks for the coin. The tax in question can only be paid in Roman currencyⁱⁱ, which is a coin engraved with the image of the reigning Caesar and an inscription claiming that he was divine. [The image on the front of your bulletin gives you an idea of what the coin probably looked like.ⁱⁱⁱ] Scholars are quite sure that the coins of the day had the emperor’s image and the words: “Caesar, Son of the Divine.”^{iv}

Jesus asks for the coin and they withdraw the evidence that exposes them – not him – as deceptive and hypocritical compromisers.^v For **Jesus’ pockets are empty**, but his opponents have no trouble supplying the idolatrous coin.^{vi} They are the ones carrying around Caesar’s money, not Jesus. They are the ones who have the emperor’s image in their pocketbooks in the sacred space of the holy temple.^{vii} It is the Pharisees who have the coin that expose just how deeply entangled with the exploitative economics of the empire they are.^{viii}

Jesus doesn’t back down from the question, but he does seem to raise the stakes about the use of money and our loyalty to God. “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s.” That was quite a bit more than they bargained for – and so the religious leaders tuck their tails and walked away. But our question remains: what do we do with Jesus’ powerful statement still staring us down two centuries later?

“Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” says the old King James Version. What belongs to whom? The unspoken question is **what is it that bears God’s image?**^{ix}

And you can rest assured when Jesus asked those ancient teachers of the law whose image was on the coin – they were already beginning to see the connections ... for the very first chapter of the book of Genesis tells us that God created humanity in the image and in the likeness of God.^x Every human life is marked with God’s divine image, and every life belongs to God. So while Caesar’s image is on the coin, God’s image is implanted on every human life! God is the Lord of all of life. **There is no sphere of life that does not belong to God.**

Our temptation is to compartmentalize life – I set this aside for God, and the rest belongs to me and to Caesar.^{xi} “This is how I live on Sundays, and then there is the rest of my life.” Jesus is saying we cannot compartmentalize our life into neatly divide into boxes labeled “God’s” and “not God’s.”^{xii}

There is no part of life that does not matter to God. There are **no areas** of the **human experience** that are off limits to our faith. For in the life of Jesus Christ, **God sanctified the entire human experience** – being born, growing up, being a teenager, eating, sleeping, suffering, wondering, crying, laughing, dying – all of life is holy and sacred.

- God cares about how we **spend our time** and **how we spend our money**.
- **Our faith influences** how we **vote** and what we **eat**.
- **How we parent** and **where we live** are matters of faith and discipleship.

For we belong to the living God, and we called are to render to God what is God’s. The Living Bible’s translates Jesus’ response: “Well then, give it to Caesar if it is his, and give God everything that belongs to God.” Friends, first and foremost, we belong to God. For God created us and we are – all of us – made in God’s image.

Despite the world bombarding us with messages like:

- you are what you **look like**,
- you are what **you have**,
- you are what **you do for a living**,
- you are what **you wear**,
- you are **who your friends are**

– **beneath all those inscriptions** is a much deeper mark: the **watery sign of the cross** made once upon a time on our foreheads that claimed us as God’s very own, made in the image of God.^{xiii}

It is God who claims us, and who made us. We do not belong to anyone or anything else. Our jobs do not own us. Our possessions do not own us. Even our families do not own us.^{xiv} We belong, soul and body, to God.^{xv}

So friends, the question remains: **how do we live our lives** as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ? We live knowing that there is NO part of our life that God does not care about, no part of our life that does not belong to God. And we live ACTING that there is nothing that we do that is not an act of our faith.

For if our faith does not affect how we live, what kind of a faith is it after all?

One of the many gifts of this congregation is that we are blessed to have so many faithful folks who have served full lives as Missionaries. As I reflected this week on what it means to give to God what is Gods – I have been thinking about and giving thanks for the witness of the missionaries in our midst. They answered YES to God’s call 45 or 50 and 60 years ago to go to Africa or to Asia and literally dedicate decades of their lives to serving God and to loving our global neighbors.

I have been so inspired and encouraged by their stories of saying goodbye to friends and families, loading a boat with their spouse and young children, and setting off to follow God’s call. The **faith with which** they said YES to God, the ways that they **offered their whole lives to God’s** service, the ways that the Holy Spirit blessed their work as they cared for so many by building and working in hospitals and clinics and seminaries and schools in places like Japan and the Congo; Indonesia and Taiwan; Korea and Brazil ... Their **stories**, their **faith**, their **lives** are **powerful witnesses** to what happens when we live remembering our whole life belongs to God and our faith influences all of our life.

I have also been inspired by the faith of Columbia Seminary President Steve Hayner. I do not know Steve personally, though I image some of you might. Steve has been diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer that is spreading quickly and the aggressive treatment has had limited affect. Steve is a man of deep faith and incredible gifts. He is doing what he can in his final days to care for those he loves, and he and his wife have been writing on their Caring Bridge blog^{xvi} encouraging hundreds with words of deep faith in the face of personal tragedy.

The profound faith with which Steve moves through his final days is another testament to what a life lived giving yourself to God can be. Steve writes, *I am now in the process of moving from life to [eternal] Life--or to being "swallowed up by Life" as Paul describes the transition through physical death in 2 Corinthians (5:4.)*^{xvii} And yet, I have heard that on his best days, Steve’s prayer is not about his life, or his death, or his fears. Steve’s prayer is:

“Lord, what would you have me do, now?”

May that be our prayer this day:
O Lord, who has created us and claimed us, teach us how to give our whole lives to you this day and this week. Amen.

Footnotes:

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- ⁱ Douglas Hare talks about the question being posed in religious terms in his Matthew Commentary. *Interpretations* (John Knox Press), Matthew, page 253.
- ⁱⁱ Douglas Hare, Matthew Commentary, *Interpretations* (John Knox Press), page 253.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_currency for image.
- ^{iv} The actual quote on the coin, according to many scholars, was: “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus.” Douglas R. A. Hare is one of many sources that mention this inscription of the coin.
- ^v Tom Long, *Mathew Commentary of Westminster Bible Companion Series*, page 251. “*withdraw the evidence that exposes them – not him – as deceptive and hypocritical compromisers*” is a direct quote.
- ^{vi} Lance Pape, Commentary on Matthew 22:15-22, written for Working Preacher: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2201 “*Jesus’ pockets are empty, but his opponents have no trouble supplying ...*” is a direct quote.
- ^{vii} Tom Long, *Mathew Commentary of Westminster Bible Companion Series*, page 251. “*They are the ones carrying around Caesar’s money, not Jesus. They are the ones who have the emperor’s image in their pocketbooks*” is a direct quote.
- ^{viii} Lance Pape, Commentary on Matthew 22:15-22, written for Working Preacher: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2201 “*...entangled with the exploitative economics of the empire...*” is a direct quote.
- ^{ix} Richard E Spalding in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4. Matthew 22:15-22, Pastoral Perspective*, page 190.
- ^x Genesis 1:26
- ^{xi} Tom Long *Mathew Commentary of Westminster Bible Companion Series*, page 252. “*temptation is to compartmentalize life – I set this aside for God, and the rest belongs to me and to Caesar.*” is a direct quote.
- ^{xii} From Laurel Mathewson’s article “Living by the Word” in October 15, 2014 *Christian Century*, page 20.
- ^{xiii} Richard E Spalding in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4. Matthew 22:15-22 – Pastoral Perspective*, page 192. “*...all those inscriptions is a much deeper mark: the watery sign of the cross made once upon a time on our foreheads...*” is a direct quote.
- ^{xiv} The previous sentences of this paragraph are paraphrased from Clayton Schmit’s commentary: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1062
- ^{xv} Tom Long, *Mathew Commentary of Westminster Bible Companion Series*, page 252. “*We belong, soul and body, to God.*” is a direct quote.
- ^{xvi} I strongly encourage you to read some of Steve’s blogs: <http://www.caringbridge.org/visit/stevehayner>
- ^{xvii} September 17th journal entry by Steve Hayner. <http://www.caringbridge.org/visit/stevehayner/journal/view/id/5419dce6cb16b4fa185d77c6>