

## **Parish of the Divine Love**

**Sermon Sunday October 18, 2020**

**Isaiah 45: 1-7; Psalm 96: 1-9; 1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10; Matthew 22: 15-22**

### **Recognizing the Image of God when we see it.**

In our Gospel text for today Jesus was confronted by his opposition and they tried to trap him. They wondered what his view was on taxes. Should God-fearing people pay taxes to Rome. Jesus responds in one of his typically brilliant and evasive ways. He says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." I love it.

Governments are necessary, taxes may be necessary, and every country has a Caesar of sorts to contend with. So, render unto that Caesar whatever is due. But don't mess around with the things that belong to God. It is very possible that Jesus is reminding the people listening that humanity is created in the very image of God and that God's law, an invitation to love God and love our neighbors, is written on our very bones. That silly little coin is nothing compared to humanity's legacy through creation. God is written all over your face and on your heart, in your mind, and on your hands. Jesus tells us that is where our primary concern should lie. Sure, we have to worry about money, and we wonder if the taxes we pay to prioritize care of neighbor, just like Jesus did. But just because we need to think about money, that doesn't mean our primary identity is in our money. Our first concern should be giving God the things that are God's, that is our very selves. Taxes are easy. Giving yourself to God. Now, that could take a little more work.

Whom do we belong to? Sometimes it seems like we belong to Caesar. Taxes, legal restrictions on our freedoms, imprisonment if you engage in civil disobedience. Or, perhaps, we feel that our job owns us. Or our families. Sometimes, we even feel owned by our material possessions. But to whom do we really belong? Look at any person. Whose inscription is on him or her? Each is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). There can be no doubt, then, what Jesus means here. Give yourselves to God because it is to him that you belong. It is God who claims us, who made us in his own image. We do not belong to anything or to anyone else. We don't even belong to ourselves. We belong to God in all our being, with all our talents, interests, time, and wealth.

The consequences of belonging to God are remarkable. First, it means that God will not forsake us. The Pharisees and the other religious leaders that Jesus denounces were notoriously bad at caring for the people. They forsook their responsibilities, and the people God gave into their care. They deserved condemnation. But God does not forsake his own. By Friday of Holy Week, Jesus made that clear in the boldest way possible. Second, it means that because we belong to God, we belong to the people of God, the body of Christ. We are baptized into this fellowship and can only lose our membership by turning our backs on God. If there is any alienation, it is our own doing. And, if we return, God is there, as always. Third, it means that we give to God

that which belongs to God's: that is, we give ourselves. We take the sacred trust and invest it in lives of worship. Sometimes, that worship occurs privately, in devotion. Sometimes, in church with our brothers and sisters in Christ. And the rest of the time, it occurs in the sphere of daily work and service. All of this is worship. Ultimately, giving ourselves to God means that we give ourselves to the world and to offer our services, prayers, talents, and times for the life of the world.

You belong to God, for you were made in God's image. God created you to bear his own divine likeness. Your purpose, your calling, is to bear that image into the world as a constant reminder that God's kingdom has a higher claim on each of us than this broken world of ours has. All kingdom incorporates a taxation system, which allows its citizens to participate in the process of maintaining the kingdom infrastructure. The system allows the citizen to share in the kingdom's commonwealth and return a set portion of the kingdom's resources back to the king. In essence, everything in a kingdom already belongs to the king, including the taxes required from the citizen, therefore taxation is simply the government's allowing its resources to pass through the hands of the citizen. The king's reputation is important to the king and is the source of the glory of his name. A king's reputation is created and sustained by the conditions of his citizens and his kingdom. Therefore, kings act in ways that are favorable to their name's sake. Giving to a king activates the king's obligation to demonstrate his glory and power to the giver and to prove that he is a greater king than all other kings. Giving to a king in his kingdom is the acknowledgment that all things belong to that king and the citizen is grateful. Because giving to a king is impossible (since all things already belong to the king), the act of giving benefits the citizen more than the king. Thus, one should never come before a king empty handed.

Some have used this passage to defend the separation of church and state. That isn't what Jesus is talking about. Some insist that this is another one of Christ's lessons on the proper place of money in our lives. Yes... but there is more. This lesson is not primarily about money. It's about recognizing the image of God when we see it in one another, and calling attention to that image as a reminder that God is very present, even when we feel the most oppressed or threatened by the world around us. When Jesus says, "Give to God the things that are God's," he's reminding us that all we are and all we have belongs to the one who created us, the one who loves us more than we can ever imagine.

I'm simply asking you to remember that you are the image of God shining out into the world, and the people you encounter every day, whether you like them or not, whether you approve of their actions or political opinions or theological beliefs, they also bear the image of God to you. Look for it. Recognize it. Know that someone is looking to you, often when you least expect it, to find that image and see it as a reminder that God has each of us marked on the palms of his hands.

Our identity as beloved children of God, bearing God's own image, shapes our behavior and our thinking. It urges us to become the people Christ calls us to be, centered on Christ, offering Christ, doing all things through Christ, to the glory of God the Father. **Amen!**