

Pentecost 20A. October 22, 2017. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. Genesis 1:24-27. I Thessalonians 1:1-10. Matthew 22:15-22.

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.¹⁶ So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.’¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?’¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius.²⁰ Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’²¹ They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Ever go to a dinner party and one of the guests asks, “So, are you Republican or Democrat?” or “How much do you earn?” or “Why some people go to church is utterly beyond me!” What do you say? What do you think? Politics, Money and Religion – three topics we have been carefully taught NOT to discuss in public!

But they’re all over today’s Gospel! Two sets of Jesus’ detractors set out to entrap him – seemingly about taxes. You might as well be listening to the morning news.

The Herodians, who bought their privilege from oppressive Rome, supported the tax in question. It was a flat tax, worth about one day’s wage, paid by the Hebrew people as tribute to Caesar – who in their eyes might as well have been Hitler or Stalin.

The Pharisees opposed this particular tax for patriotic, religious and economic reasons. Even holding a coin with the graven image of a foreign deity – for Caesar proclaimed himself divine – was against the commandments: to have no other gods and not to make any graven images.

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Jesus cleverly avoids charges of treason the Herodians would bring and charges of lack of patriotism and piety the Pharisees would bring.

But Jesus does much more! He calls those questioning him to a higher standard than they expected. Jesus is not talking about the separation of church and state. He’s not suggesting a 50/50 compromise between God and Caesar.

Today's story is about our deepest, personal selves and identity.

Whose image was on the coin? The one who made it: Caesar, the Emperor.

Whose image is on us? Hear again Genesis 1:26 – “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image.’”

We bear God's image. We belong to the one who made us. No matter what we may do or say, no matter what country we are blessed to live in, no matter what may happen to us, we are first, foremost, and forever God's own beloved children. This identity aids us in becoming the persons we are called to be.

Before we are Democrat, Republican, or Independent, we are people of faith. And how we spend our money is a religious matter. We pay our taxes, but we do not belong to the government. We work hard at our jobs, but we do not belong to our employer. We are much more than our pension or retirement fund. Our deepest self is God's.

"Rather than parceling out some money for Caesar and some for God, Jesus may have been making the point that nothing belongs to Caesar. Since everything ultimately belongs to God, he was saying that what we believe we own or is due us is actually only on loan to us." (Judith Johnson-Siebold, "Balance Sheet")

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A pastor friend of mine was giving a children's sermon on this story. He took the smallest child in church that morning and had him stand in an offering plate to show that all we are and have belongs to God. Suddenly the little child's brother cried out, "Take my brother out of there." He – perhaps more than anyone else there that morning – grasped the radical totality of such an image, such a way of life.

As people formed in God's image we seek to be good citizens, good parents and grandparents, supporters of our community, our church, education. God's image is stamped on us when we sit down to discern issues in our voting pamphlets.

But we face daily dilemmas as to HOW to live in God's image. Our employer says, we're cutting retirement benefits: tell the retirees. Our grandkids have soccer games and birthday parties on Sunday mornings. Once my husband was told in a summer job at a chemical company, "We always dump our waste in the river ... get on with it."

So where are we, as Christians, in the tax debate that faces our country today?
God's intention is for good government that cares for all residents and has particular compassion for those at the lower end of our economy.

Sometimes society is blessed with whistleblowers, prophets, investigative journalists and great leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Sometimes God's image is shown in quiet acts such as living a life of gratitude, choosing to be kind and considerate, sticking up for a fellow-student who is being bullied.

What do we do when we are faced with a situation where we think a heroic push-back is required? Pray / discern / talk with fellow-believers / act.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a quiet, modest Lutheran pastor, and a saint and hero of the church, did exactly that. When he realized that the government of Germany in the late 1930s was infiltrating churches and seminaries with nationalistic idolatry, he started a resistance seminary. He refused to stop preaching as demanded by the government and he became involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler. He was executed a few weeks before the end of the war, a brilliant mind with a courageous and deeply loving heart.

And ... two or three days after Jesus answered the question about the taxes and the coin, the Pharisees, Herodians and Romans completed the plot to have him crucified. He will lose his life for living a life 100% in God's image.

Easter morning resurrection promises all of us new life. Our lifelong journey of living in God's image began for many of us when we were baptized, for some much earlier; this journey continued, for many of us, through Sunday School, Confirmation, young adulthood and for most of us will go on into old age and for all of us goes on until the day we die and rest in peace in God's still-loving arms. This is the story we love to tell – of Jesus and his love, of living in God's image. (Note: opening hymn was "I love to tell the story")

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Very likely no two of us share exactly the same understandings of how God's image is reflected in our beliefs about money, religion and politics. They might not be topics for the dinner party, but they ARE topics for our dinner tables and for our consciences.

Some of our wider church's sons and daughters spend one or two years in the Lutheran Volunteer Corps rather than pursuing an M.B.A. Many Christians offer at least 10% of their time in service to others.

We live in God's image when we take the time to talk to our kids and grandkids about Jesus; when we spend the last 5 minutes of the day reflecting on our blessings; when we check up on our neighbor who doesn't get out anymore; when we take the time to phone our aging parent; when we listen to the sometimes-annoying person who needs our empathetic ear.

And when we prayerfully and seriously consider how much money we can commit to our church next year. This is part of our challenge for the week to come: to complete our "estimate of giving cards" and return them here next Sunday.

We may not agree on our politics or how we understand the creeds of the church or how we should spend our money, but we are all united around the Communion table; we all ask for and receive God's forgiveness; we all seek to give to God what is God's: to live in our baptismal image for the good of the church, the family, the community and the nation – as our best abilities allow and our best conscience guides – and as the Holy Spirit blesses us with discernment. For this we pray, in Jesus' Name. For we know Jesus' kingdom is in but not of this world. Amen.