

October 22, 2023
The Rev. Beth Orling

Pentecost 21A. Pr. 24. October 22, 2023. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA.
Exodus 33:12-23, Psalm 99, 1 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 evening news.

The Herodians, who bought their privilege from oppressive Rome, supported the tax in question.

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 the emperor proclaimed himself divine – was against the commandment 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.

And Jesus does much more! He calls those questioning him to a high standard. Jesus is not talking about the separation of church and state. He’s not suggesting a 50/50 compromise between God and the government.

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: first, foremost, and forever God's beloved children. This identity aids us in becoming the persons we are called to be.

How we spend our money is a religious and spiritual 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 belong to our Creator. What we believe we own is actually only on loan to us.”

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A 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 basket 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 spouse was told in a summer job at a chemical company, “We always dump our waste in the river ... get on with it.”

What do we do when we are faced with a situation where we think a heroic push-back is required? God does not promise us easy answers. God calls us to use our powers of reasoning and judgment. 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. The government demanded that he stop preaching. He kept on. Eventually and after deep and difficult discernment, 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 Jesus crucified. He will lose his life for living a life 100% in God's image.

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Easter morning 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 of living in God's image.

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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.

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John, one of our Monday shower volunteers, a member of Vinland Lutheran, here in Poulsbo, went to his church council this week and asked for \$250 of their outreach funds to help fund the hot lunches we provide. They said, "no," and then asked how many people were fed the previous Monday. "Twenty-two" he said. "Good," they answered, "we will donate \$2,200 to the shower program, \$100 for each person that was served last week." Living in God's image is living a life of generosity.

In the coming weeks we will prayerfully and seriously consider how much money we can commit to our church next year. This will be part of our challenge next month: to complete our "estimate of giving cards" for 2024.

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. For we know Jesus' kingdom is **in** but not **of** this world. Amen.

