

Sermon for 10/22

**Exodus 33:12-23**

**Psalm 99**

**1 Thessalonians 1:1-10**

**Matthew 22:15-22**

Sermon: **THE FACE ON THE COIN**

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: He is the image of the invisible God.

Before I leave the house to venture out into the world, my wife is constantly telling me, “Go spritz your hair; it’s all over the place.” And when she tells me that, I dutifully troop into the bathroom where I keep a little spray bottle filled with water precisely for that purpose. I spritz my hair, then shake my head like a dog to shed the excess, ruffle it like this to try to get it all roughly uniform, and then head out into the world.

But suppose one day my wife is still in bed when I head out into the world. And suppose that when I’m out in the world, some stranger walks up to me, takes a good look, and says to me: “Go spritz your hair; it’s all over the place.” My reaction would be: “Who are you to tell me what to do with my hair?”

Right?

Let’s keep that thought in mind, because we’ll come back to it later.

The incident described in our Gospel selection for today is one of several that Matthew and the other Gospel authors relate concerning certain tense conversations that occurred between Jesus and different groups of orthodox Jewish religious leaders during the final week of His life.

In the earlier confrontations, we see Jesus leveling criticisms against these leaders through the use of several parables pointing towards their failures to exercise their God-given authority in the pursuit of God-ordained objectives. Jesus has been, so to say, on the attack. In today's reading, however, these religious authorities launch a counterattack. And they do so by directing at Jesus a carefully formulated question, a question arising from the fact that Palestine was an occupied country with the Jews subject to the laws of the Roman Empire, along with the fact that a large portion of the Jewish population were deeply resentful and often rebellious against that subjugation. The authorities ask Him these questions in public, while the crowds look on and listen, and their aim is to make Jesus discredit Himself by His own words in the presence of the people.

So let's read it together. Matthew 22: 15-22.

“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

The tax they were asking about was basically a poll tax, and it was a tax that every adult Jew, male and female, up the age of sixty-five was required to pay. The amount of the tax was one denarius, which was roughly equivalent to the normal payment for a day's work, so it wasn't just a token but it also wasn't a really heavy tax.

The question they ask Jesus set Him a very real dilemma. If He said that it was unlawful to pay the tax, they could report him to the Roman government officials as a treasonous person and his arrest would certainly follow. If he said that it was lawful to pay the tax, he would stand as a traitor in the eyes of many of his followers. Not only did the people resent the tax as everyone resents taxation: they resented it even more for religious reasons. To a Jew, God was their only king: to pay tax to an earthly king was to admit the validity of his kingship and thereby to insult God. Therefore the more religiously enthusiastic of the Jews insisted that any tax paid to a foreign king was necessarily sinful. Whichever way Jesus might answer – so his questioners thought – he would lay himself open to attack.

But Jesus was wise. He asked to see a denarius coin, which was stamped with the Emperor's head, and he asked: “Whose image is on this coin?”

In the ancient Roman days, as soon as a new Caesar or emperor rose to the throne, he struck his own coinage with his own face stamped on the coins. (That's in fact one of the ways archeologists even today use to date their digs: if they find a

Roman coin, they can just look at the image stamped on its front and determine in whose reign the coin was minted.)

Moreover, and this is what lent such force to the question Jesus asked, in those ancient days, all coinage was held to be the property of the emperor whose image it bore. Jesus asked whose image was on the coin. The answer was that Caesar's head was on it. "Well then," said Jesus, "give it back to him. It is his. Return to Caesar what belongs to him."

But then he adds something that elevates his response from a merely clever debate ploy to turn the tables on his cynical interrogators, that elevates it to the highest and deepest spiritual level. He says: "And give to God what belongs to God."

Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God. This terse and epigrammatic answer is usually interpreted as Jesus laying down the principle that every Christian has, so to say, a dual citizenship. The Christian is necessarily a citizen of some particular country and society, and to that circumstance he owes many things. He owes his personal safety and the safety of his family; he owes all public services: very few of us could provide our own lighting and sewage and water systems, not to mention medical care and education and old age insurance, if left to our own devices. Christians, according to this interpretation, have a duty to be responsible citizens.

But the Christian is also a citizen of heaven, and there are matters of principle and religion in which the highest responsibility of the Christian is to God. It may well be that the two citizenships never clash. But when the Christian is convinced that it is God's will that something should be done or something should not be done, and if that runs contrary to what the governing authority would require, then the greater Christian responsibility is to God.

As I say, that is what this response of Jesus is usually taken to establish; although if that is the principle, then Christian history affords many and terrible examples of the failure to abide by that principle. For history clearly demonstrates how readily entire populations of people, Christians included, can be recruited to the most terrible and even demonic purposes by the forces of indoctrination and propaganda, of political intimidation and peer pressure, of fear and ambition and patriotic fervor: Germany, to take just one example, was a thoroughly Christian nation that enthusiastically followed its national socialist leaders into a war on the rest of the civilized world. Or to take another, the northern and southern armies of our own Civil War were drawn from largely Christian populations.

But without meaning to diminish the importance of that principle as a guide for the true and devout Christian in cases of moral conflict, I'd like to suggest that Jesus, in the answer he gives to the Pharisees and the other religious leaders when they were trying to trap him, was not simply instructing us on how to rank our loyalties; he was also doing what he always does: he was describing reality, true reality, from heaven's point of view. In this case, he wasn't just telling us where our highest loyalties should lie, he was telling us why.

"Show me a coin," he says. And when they do so, he asks, "Whose image is on it?" "Caesar's," they say, and Jesus replies that the image on the coin establishes its true owner. The true owner of that coin is Caesar. That's his image, so that's his coin.

And by now all those who would have been listening to him, including the Pharisees and the others, would certainly have been reminded of the spiritual reality established in the most holy words of their own most holy scripture. Genesis 1, verses 26-27, describing the culmination and pinnacle of all creation, reads as follows:

Genesis 1; 26-27

*"Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground."*

*27 So God created mankind in his own image,*

*in the image of God he created them;*

*male and female he created them."*

The image on the coin establishes who the coin really belongs to. The image on all of us establishes who we really belong to. All the failures of humankind can be traced to this one source: ignorance or forgetfulness of to whom we truly belong.

When my wife tells me to spritz my hair, it never even occurs to me to be resentful or rebellious, to charge out of the house with my cowlicks sticking out in all directions. Why not? Because at a level deeper than conscious awareness, I recognize and acknowledge that, in a sense that can't be said of anyone else in the

world, my wife owns me: I belong to her. When a mother tells her son to clean his room, he cleans his room. When the neighbor lady across the street tells him to clean his room, he shrugs and continues on his way, laughing about her with his friends. What's the difference. Because the son, at a level deeper than conscious awareness, recognizes and acknowledges that his mother owns him: he belongs to her.

That's what Jesus is reminding us of when he says: Give to God what belongs to God. Give to God what bears his image. Give yourself over to God's will and God's purposes for your life. Why? Because you bear His image, and you therefore belong to him.

The image of God in you is, of course, not something you can see in a mirror. The image is in your spirit. It may be covered with layers and layers of your own humanity, with envy and jealousy and hardness of heart and misguided instruction and cultural propaganda...but it is still there. It's like the Roman coin discovered in one of those archeological digs, covered with centuries of rust and wear and disfigurement. The archeologist, with patient and painstaking care, with the tenderest touch and endless patience, cleans and repairs that blackened coin until, finally, we can see the image of Caesar.

Think of Christ's own Holy Spirit doing the same work for us: chipping away at the rust on our spirits, repairing our wounds with a deft touch, cleaning away the detritus of our own lives with the deftest and most tender touch, and with endless patience...and you begin to understand the honor and unthinkable privilege of belonging to God.

My wife tells me to spritz my hair, not because she enjoys ordering me around. She does it because I am hers, I belong to her, and she is therefore sending a part of herself out into the world. When the world sees me, and my hair, in a sense it sees her, and her love for me.

And so, gracious God, our prayer for this morning is that we never forget that we belong to You, as children belong to a mother, as husbands and wives belong to each other, a contract of ownership forged, not in servitude, but in love. Let our prayer always be: Thy will be done, and let it always be a prayer, not of servitude, but of love. Let our aim always be to uncover your image in us, and our helper always be the one of who Paul wrote He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, Your son and the archeologist of our souls, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.