
IN GOD'S LIKENESS

Many years ago, the confirmation class I was teaching unanimously decided that if I were to run for president, they would all vote for me.

- Now, I don't think they were just trying to get on my good side,
 - and I despite their strong support, I'm not announcing my candidacy.
- Rather, I mention that class discussion because it led to a conversation regarding the type of people we elect to our political offices,
 - and ultimately, we found ourselves asking, "Could JESUS CHRIST be elected President of the United States?"

Really, what lies at the heart of this passage today is the question, "To whom do we pledge our allegiance?"

- And what truly lies behind that question is the deeper question of who we are and how that informs the decisions we make,
 - not just politically, but in every aspect of our lives.

Here we are at the point in Matthew's narrative of JESUS' life where things are getting pretty tense.

- Earlier in the week we are reading about, JESUS had entered Jerusalem and been greeted by adoring crowds.
- Riding this wave of popularity, HE entered the Temple and overthrew the tables of the money-changers.
 - In doing so, JESUS challenged both the political and religious powers of HIS day.
- So, the religious leaders follow up by confronting JESUS about the authority behind HIS actions,
 - and JESUS counters by telling the parables we've heard in the previous weeks: The Parable of the Two Sons, The Parable of the Tenants, and The Parable of the Wedding Banquet, which we heard last week.
 - These parables confronted the leaders of HIS day with their own authority and with their standing before GOD.

So, it is for this reason that two groups come to question HIM.

- Normally, the Pharisees and the Herodians had little to do with each other.
 - The Herodians derived their power from the Roman occupiers,
 - while the Pharisees associated more closely with those who were occupied and oppressed.
 - These two groups declared a temporary truce in order to work together to trap and get rid of this upstart rabbi.

The question they pose is clever, asking JESUS whether it was lawful to pay the poll or imperial tax that funded the Roman occupation.

- If JESUS says, "No," HE will place HIMSELF in opposition to the Roman government—which is not a wise thing to do.
- If JESUS says, "Yes," HE would lose the support of the crowds and perhaps turn them to disapproval of HIS ministry.

That's what they expect to happen because their question is clever.

- For baseball fans, however, this is one of those passages that proves that JESUS is a Dodger.
 - HIS response is not just ingenious; it is inspired, and leads to an exchange that is as revealing as it is brief.

After asking if any of HIS questioners has a coin of the Empire—the only coin that could be used to pay the Roman tax in question—they quickly produce one.

- JESUS asks whose image is on the coin, and they answer, “The Emperor’s.”
 - But there’s more going on here that just appears at a first read of this text.
- Along with the image of Caesar on the coin, there is an engraved claim to Caesar’s divinity.
 - That means that any Jew holding the coin is breaking the first commandment:
 - to have no other gods besides the one GOD.
- So, JESUS tells them to, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s,
 - and to GOD the things that are GOD’S.
 - And with this one sentence, JESUS does not simply dodge their trap and confound their plans;
 - HE issues a challenge to HIS listeners that reverberates through the centuries to our churches today.

Now there are a number of ways I might preach on this passage.

- Certainly, I could remind us of the importance of civic engagement, especially with the presidential election just a year away.
 - And at the same time, I could urge you to come to church so that GOD’S unchanging word of unconditional grace and forgiveness can be heard and propel you out into the world to serve as GOD’S hands and voice.
- Or, I could take a more political approach, finding in JESUS’ judgment the warning to not give into the “emperors” of this day,
 - while urging loyalty to the Kingdom of GOD, which would likely sound like what you might perceive to be my political affiliation and views.
- Or, I could simply approach this as a stewardship sermon—it is October after all—
 - and remind you of just how much of what you possess is truly GOD’S and therefore deserving of greater generosity.

Instead, I want to share with you a line from the first chapter of Genesis:

- *“Let us make humankind in our own image—according to our likeness.”*
- Likeness—the Greek word *ikon*—is the word both Genesis and Matthew choose.
 - So, a better translation of v. 20 of today’s reading would be, “Whose likeness is this (on the coin), and what title?”
 - Those listening closely to JESUS’ word choice would have harkened back to GOD’S initial pronouncement and promise from Genesis:
 - we bear the likeness of GOD and are therefore made to be more than we sometimes realize.

Think about that for a moment.

- We are made in the image and likeness of GOD, and because we bear GOD’S likeness, we are to seek to act like GOD.
 - Not, mind you, like gods who lord their authority over others for self-gain,
 - but rather like GOD—the ONE who creates, and sustains, and nurtures, and redeems, and saves—no matter what the cost.
- We are called, that is, to serve as GOD’S agents, GOD’S partners, GOD’S co-workers, exercising dominion over creation,
 - not as an act of power, but rather as an act of stewardship,
 - extending to all the abundant life GOD wishes for all.

Notice that, despite the fact that JESUS' opponents carry a coin with a graven image and claim of Caesar's divinity, JESUS accuses them neither of blasphemy nor disloyalty.

- Rather, HE calls them *hypocrites*.
 - The word *hypocrite* ultimately came from the Greek word *hypokrites*, which means "an actor" or "a stage player."
 - It's made up of two Greek words that literally translate as "an interpreter from underneath."
 - Those actors in the ancient Greek theater wore large masks to mark which character they were playing, and so they interpreted the story from underneath their masks.
 - JESUS' opponents were another false likeness, for they had forgotten who they were and in whose likeness they were made.
 - And this serves as a reminder that our primary identity is as GOD'S children and stewards, and charged to act like the GOD we see in JESUS.

Figuring out what that means for our daily life, decisions, and actions is never easy.

- And, while it is tempting to suggest how that should be, I also realize that often any persuasion I make will be perceived to reflect more my political stance rather than encouraging you to figure out how it is that JESUS calls you to do your best to embody the Kingdom of GOD.
 - The truth is that Christians of good faith *can* disagree on the best way to live into and further GOD'S Kingdom on earth.

Does this mean that I, as preacher, should never say anything about the issues of the day? No.

- But it means that when I name those issues, I strive to do so seeing the values that JESUS lives, while still trying to leave space for the variety of voices and contributions of those who hear.
- It means encouraging and helping us to look for GOD'S work beyond our community and point out the places where we will find GOD, even if it doesn't fit with our particular positions.

We are created in and bear the likeness of GOD.

- So, when JESUS tells us to give to GOD the things that are GOD'S, HE is calling us to give to GOD...well...ourselves.
 - How we live, the choices we make are to reflect that likeness.
 - It doesn't mean making our decisions and then finding a way to make that fit with GOD.
 - Rather, we are to seek GOD'S will, and then endeavor to make our decisions and choices show that image,
 - to give to GOD all that is GOD'S including ourselves—we who are made in the likeness of GOD.
 - That is not an easy thing to do.
 - But in answering JESUS' first question, "Whose likeness is this?" about ourselves,
 - we should begin by recognizing that we are created in GOD'S likeness,
 - and then strive to give to GOD the things that are GOD'S.