

***The Image Challenge***  
**Preached by**  
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**For Reflection:**

*"If you give what can be taken, you are not really giving. Take what you are given, not what you want to be given. Give what cannot be taken."*

Idries Shah

**Hebrew Scripture Reading:** *Psalm 99:1-5, 9*

The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble! God sits enthroned raised up over all the heavenly host: let the earth quake! The Lord is great in Zion; exalted over all the peoples. We praise your great and awesome name. Holy is the Lord! Mighty Ruler, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. Let us praise the Lord our God; worship at the footstool of God. Holy is the Lord! We praise the Lord our God, and worship at the holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy.

**Gospel Reading** Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 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." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

**Meditation**

***The Image Challenge***

There was a coincidence between the liturgical calendar and our church calendar for this Sunday that rarely happens. As you know, I follow the lectionary when it suits me or us; and have done so less frequently since the pandemic. Imagine my surprise when the lectionary offered a text of Jesus teaching about money for our stewardship Sunday.

I have only preached on this text once before. I don't particularly care for it. While it's always nice to see the hero elude the traps of those who would bring him down, if we are

looking for a Lord and Savior who is a debate champion, we're not looking for much; and we won't get much. There are many recorded exchanges, where Jesus answered wisely; where he evaded a trap; or met a challenge. Yet in none of the exchanges recorded for us, is Jesus satisfied with responding only to his challengers; there is always a word for his followers. The Herodians walked away satisfied that Jesus wasn't going to tell people not to pay taxes. We should walk away less satisfied—or less complacent, at any rate.

If we want to be entirely literal—which this congregation never does, and Jesus rarely was, we might point out that all of our money has dead people on it, and so we don't have to give the money to anyone—to government or God. That would be a specious—or—really bad pun—specie argument.

Yet, there is another image in the subtext of the story. If those things imprinted with the emperor's image belong to the emperor, then to Whom belong those beings imprinted with the image of the Creator. We are those creatures and we belong to God. It is central to our faith that in life and death we belong to God. All that we have and are comes to us from God—our whole world and existence bear the identifying marks of the One who made all things.

Yet often we resist acting on the truths we mouth. We excuse ourselves by saying, "Surely we are not called to hand it all back; the means of providing food and shelter and clothing; the dollars for education. Surely, we are not expected to hand it all back including our lives themselves, everyone to priests or pastors, nuns, saints, martyrs, or 24/7 church volunteers." The people of our God have never called for that; and don't do so now.

This text demands something far more difficult. It requires that we think and pray as we consider where our loyalties lie; and how we express those loyalties; how we live in two kingdoms at once; and the highly specific question of how we, who are imprinted with the image of God and bear the name of God's son, handle our money. Being made in the image of God and being called to live out that image can be more challenging than we first assume and more challenging than we might like.

These questions are between us and our God. **They are also among us as a community of God.** If we have come to think of things that are a matter of conscience between us and our forgiving God as an excuse for throwing a few dollars at charity and thinking they should be glad for it, we have missed about 60% of what Jesus had to say; not 60% of what Jesus had to say about money but what he had to say about everything. (If you want a preacher to be more Jesus-like, that would mean 31 sermons a year on money.)

During a stewardship campaign, officers will often hear: "I only hear from the church when it wants money" or "that's all it talks about." If those statements were mostly true, it would mean there are no weekly emails, notices about the deaths of members, newsletters, bulletins, notes from the pastor, pastoral care calls from committee and pastor, holiday or other encouraging cards, or healing meals. That would mean there are no opportunities for our reports of mission work, fellowship, or education. If any of us have the perception the church is all about money, this is an invitation to don corrective lenses. In fact, it is entirely possible we should have been talking about money more often, and more directly than we have in order to most effectively carry out the mission this congregation desires for itself.

This particular part of Christ's body has identified itself as a congregation which operates from a historic building, sustains a significant music ministry, has responsive leadership, welcomes and includes newcomers and people of all backgrounds, colors, orientations, political and social beliefs, and gathers weekly for nurturing challenging spiritual worship and

companionable fellowship. From that core of faith development and spiritual strength, we reach out to the world demonstrating Christ's compassion and reflecting God's image with which we are imprinted.

It takes money to maintain this model of Christian ministry; money which is reflected in the draft budget everyone received. That budget isn't the Board's budget. It is the congregation's budget. We are aware, both practically and pastorally of those among us who are living on a fixed budget. While we do ask people to be responsible to the promises they have made, we never place pressure on anyone to give or give more. But each household needs to consider whether its gratitude for God's blessings might and ought be more generously expressed.

Further, as has been communicated in a number of ways, 2023 will close with a major budget deficit—more than predicted but not remotely relieved by my retirement prior to the end of the year. This is serious business for the congregation to address, not merely assume officers have a financial wand that does miracles.

There are no easy solutions to these financial challenges. Do not be in denial that change is needed to maintain a sustainable future for Christ's ministry in this place; changes which will both involve and affect everyone. Those changes may involve sacrifice in the form of financial giving; a re-visioned model for ministry; or any number of means. That is your way to discern with God's guiding Spirit.

This is not an announcement of doom. This congregation has many gifts; a committed membership that loves its church; has faced and overcome many challenges and can do so again. But it won't just happen. Simply waiting to see what happens is also a choice and not likely to bring about hoped for outcomes. Begin by partnering **NOW** with your Board and other leaders—with prayer and money and your personal involvement

The text and the times require that we seriously, prayerfully reflect on what it means to be made in the image of God and how Jesus' calls us to give to God what belongs to God and that includes our money. How we choose and what we choose will determine the image of God the world sees through our life together.

Will they see people satisfied with slick and easy answers; the brutal caesars who walk away once their own agenda is satisfied? Or—will they see God's faithfulness and God's generosity? Will they see a people who live as we have been called to live since the dawn of creation, not going it alone, but bound by promises to live in loving holy relationships, which are also occasionally contentious, often challenging relationships with other fallible human beings? Will they see Christ's sacrificial love for the sake of the whole world? Will they see Christ's compassion for the poor, the sick, the mourning and those who are exiled from society? Will they see that we truly believe God is the giver of all that we have and is the securer of our lives? Will they see the depth of our gratitude for all that we have received and all that we regularly thank God for.

When they look at us will they see the image of God, by Whose grace and good power, we live and move and have our being and by Whom we are empowered to be Christ's body in the world? When they look at us, Who will they see?

## **Prayers for Others and Ourselves**

Compassionate God: This day, we pray for a world in need:

A world where fear, panic and an urge to violence as a quick solution to frustration and anger can override thought, hospitality and good judgment

Where disease strikes terror

Where war ravages lives

Where trust is a fragile thing or doesn't exist at all

With your gift of faith to us, with trust in you and empowered by your spirit may we be bearers of calm, safety and peace in the places where we learn and teach, tend and heal, work and serve

We pray as Christ taught us to pray ....

### **The Lord's Prayer**

**Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day, our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil,**

**for thine is the kingdom and the power  
and the glory forever. Amen.**