

Sermon – Sunday, Oct. 18, 2020
Trinity Lutheran Church – Herkimer, NY
Preacher/Presider – Rev. Edwina Landry
Matthew 22:15-22

In the Image of God

Over the last few weeks we've heard in Mathew's gospel how the Pharisees are becoming increasingly more agitated with Jesus. His parables are hitting a nerve with them. When Jesus told the parable of the wicked tenants Matthew says the Pharisees "wanted to arrest Him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded Him as a prophet." Jesus was becoming a trouble maker in the eyes of the Pharisees and the other religious leaders. They felt he had to be stopped. And so, in today's text we hear that the Pharisees and the Herodians plotted together to entrap Jesus.

This is an interesting alliance that is important not to overlook. In Jesus' time, the Pharisees and Herodians were not friends. They had strong differences of opinions, particularly about taxes. The Herodians supported the rule of Herod, who was given authority by the Roman rulers and cooperated with them. The Pharisees on the other hand were the Jewish religious leaders who strictly followed the religious laws. They didn't support the paying of taxes to the emperor. The annual payment of this tax to Rome was a painful reminder of being in lands occupied by foreign powers who worshiped false gods. In fact, the coins themselves bearing the image of the emperor Tiberius Caesar's stated his title – son of a god – meaning that he himself was considered divine. This was considered idolatry by the Pharisees because it violated the first

commandment, “I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me.” Yet as Jesus pointed out, by carrying these coins and paying into the tax system, the Pharisees themselves were breaking the very commandment they professed to uphold. Despite these differences between the Herodians and the Pharisees, these two groups teamed up against one common enemy – Jesus.

You might wonder how Jesus could be anyone’s enemy. Yet, the Pharisees and Herodians felt threatened by Jesus who was preaching a new way to live and worship. This was a threat to both the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman government. If Jesus responded that they should pay the taxes, then He could be accused of promoting allegiance to the Roman Emperor who proclaimed himself as a god vs. the true God whom the Jews and early Christians worshipped. If Jesus responded not to pay the taxes, then the Roman authorities could arrest him for being a subversive and encouraging people to fight against the government. Either way, they felt that they had Jesus trapped, but they were the ones who were actually trapped only they didn’t know it.

While the Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders proclaimed to worship only one God, they were in fact proclaiming otherwise through their actions of using these Roman coins with the image of the false god Caesar. When Jesus looked at the coins, he asked the Pharisees and Herodians, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” The literal translation from the Greek is “Whose icon or image is this?” It’s the same word used in the first chapter of Genesis 1:26, when God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.” Like artistic icons where it is said that if you look into them, they will give you a glimpse into eternity. What Jesus was asking

them – and us – is do we remember in whose image or likeness we were made, and what glimpse of eternity do we see? When we don't remember in whose image we were made, we too are hypocrites, which literally means pretenders or ones who put on false appearances.

When we forget that we are made in God's image, then it's easy for us to act in ways that are against God. We turn inward – what is called sin – when we put ourselves, our wants, and our desires first – rather than putting God and God's kingdom first. Instead of kindness and mercy, we can find ourselves being quick to anger and resentment. Instead seeing others through the eyes of love, we can seek only to have our own way. It can cause us to team up even with those we normally don't agree with– like the Pharisees and Herodians did with each other – in order to protect our own interests and make a scapegoat out of someone else like they did with Jesus. That's what bullies do. This need to protect what is in our own best interests, and to alienate another person out of fear that they may take something away from us sets us up to follow false gods who promise us whatever we desire. That's what false gods do; and their promises are empty. Eventually we are left with the painful truth that the false image we were following brings pain and suffering rather than the new life found in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus' time, the Roman government promised peace, called the Pax Romana. They promised peace if people would pay their taxes to Caesar. They were allowed to practice their own religion as long as they didn't cause any trouble and go against the Romans. As long as they didn't upset the status quo everything was okay, even if that meant not standing up for the truth. Yet, Jesus wasn't afraid to tell the truth. He challenged the status quo then and now. And he challenges us as his disciples to challenge it today. We must stand up against false idols that lure

us into a false sense of security and peace if it is contrary to Jesus' teachings. The only true peace is found in the one true God known to us in the person of Jesus the Christ. Only Jesus can give us true security, joy, and peace. Jesus is our only Savior – no other person or thing or image.

So, what images do we carry around with us? Is it an abundance of money or a credit card that makes us feel secure? What about our cell phones? How many people go crazy when they don't have it with them! Maybe we carry around a small stone with an inspirational saying on it, a pocket angel, or some other kind of trinket to remind us that we are not alone. While these things are fine, if we put more trust in them than in God then we too are creating idols. There are so many images today all over the media that promise so much –security, safety, prosperity, power - but they can make us forget who we are and whose we are.

It reminds me of a scene from the movie, “the Lion King.” Mufasa was dead, and his son Simba was the rightful next king. However, Simba didn't want to step up to that role. His hopes and dreams were gone now that his father was dead. Evil seemed to be winning, and Simba was not going to take on that fight. He planned on hiding. He forgot who he was. But one evening when he looked into the water and only saw his own reflection, his wise friend Rafiki urged him to look harder. Simba did, and he found the face of his father reflected back at him. So often we do the same thing. We forget that we are all created in God's image. Even the people who look different, act different, think or belief differently are all created in God's image. God's face, God's heart, God's love is reflected through all of us, and through all of creation.

We who follow Jesus, need to remember that his image is the one that needs to be the focus of our lives. His image is the one that we need to call to mind in every conversation, every decision, and every action we take. How many conflicts could be resolved if we saw God's image in each person? Jesus' image is the one that gives us the clearest glimpse of eternity. His image is the one that gives us the clearest image of God. Jesus says to give to "God the things that are God's." Everything is God's; we are merely entrusted as stewards of it all. As we go from worship this week, let's remember that everything is God's, especially each and every human being who are made in the image of God. Let us live our lives in such a way that Jesus' image is seen through ours and that Jesus' love is experienced through our actions. May we live lives of grace that give others a glimpse of eternity, and bring forth the kingdom of heaven here on earth. Amen.