

What is God's?

Text: St. Matthew 22:15-22

Americans have in mind a firm constitutional principle that demands the separation of church and state, although, technically, the constitution only lays out the somewhat more limited, "congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of religion." This separation is a principle that many have suggested is Christ's own, for it is Christ who told the Pharisees that one is "to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Thus during the 1960s when liberal Protestant ministers and Catholic priests and rabbis began talking from pulpits about political action, first with respect to the civil rights movement, and then later with respect to the Viet Nam War, many of their more conservative brethren thundered that politics had no business in the pulpit, and Jesus himself said so. It is, however, a principle that many of the contemporary descendants of those preachers apparently no longer hold to; indeed, they feel no restraint in telling their congregations specifically how to vote, and in telling the IRS that they can go to hell for suggesting that this is not legal.

It is not exactly that preachers have given up on dividing things between what is Caesar's and what is God's; it is just that they are disagreed about what belongs to whom. Thus preachers on both ends of the political spectrum generally feel that they are both protecting the principle and justified in weighing in politically if they can say that the topic belongs to God in the first place. With those rather loose strictures in place, then, it would seem that the lectionary's invitation to preach on "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" two weeks before an important presidential election is an invitation to hit a softball out of the park, and to explain to you the candidate for whom you are to vote and to explain why it is religiously necessary to do so.

I do not intend, however, to swing at that pitch. There are two reasons. First of all, I don't think it would do any good. During the last presidential election, a reporter from the local newspaper in the area of the church I was serving called and asked for my thoughts about endorsing candidates from the pulpit. I explained carefully to him that I was a Presbyterian, and telling Presbyterians for whom they were to vote was surely a good way to get them to vote the other way. We are the descendants of the Scots, and therefore a stubborn people. The other reason I am not going to swing at that pitch is, is because this passage quite frankly is *not* about dividing the things of the world into a pile that is Caesar's and one that is God's. After all, if you reason things out correctly, you will recognize that everything in the world is God's anyhow, and Caesar and everybody else have what they have only on tolerance; it is a loan, as it were. There is only one pile, and you're wasting everybody's time and patience if you try to claim that there are two.

But if this passage is not about a division between what is Caesar's and what is God's, what, then, is it about? What it is about, I want to suggest, a bit teasingly, is that it is about representations, or, images or symbols; or more simply, it is about pictures and images. That is not as far fetched as it may sound, nor is it a change of subject any different than the one Jesus makes. For when the Pharisees ask him about religion and politics, that is, whether one should pay taxes or not, he responds by a short commentary on the picture of Caesar on a coin.

Now, we use and have symbols and pictures for many reasons, and they do many things for us. They are, first of all, reminders. We all have pictures of those who are close to us in heart, but farther away from us in physical distance. Those pictures are there to remind us of those people. We have pictures to remind us of those who have been important to us, but are no longer with us. We also have pictures to remind us of favorite places. Pictures and symbols in this way,

not only remind us, but they show us what and who belongs to us in some heartfelt way.

This is an idea that we also extend and turn around as we deliberately use images and pictures not only to remind us of what belongs to us, but as a way of reminding other people what belongs to us legally. Ranchers, for example, brand cattle so that everybody who sees the lazy bar S image on the back end of a cow knows to whom it belongs. As we drive along Massachusetts Avenue, the flags outside the embassies remind us whose embassy and whose country it is that we are seeing. In an extended way, the logos of companies are not just advertising; in time, they come to represent a claim or a stake. Thus it is no surprise, for example, that a McDonald's restaurant in a foreign country may be deeply resented by the natives, if they feel that it is a picture of American dominance. We are no different, and we resent pictures and images that would seem to imply claims and stakes by our enemies.

Now, this use of claiming and staking things out by the use of pictures is an ancient technique for maintaining power. Conquered and dominated countries surely will not rebel when they are faced with a sizeable and fierce army. But somewhere along the way, rulers figured out that if they simply placed pictures of themselves in prominent places, that those pictures would convey to the conquered populace the claim and the power of the conqueror. You don't have to have the army immediately present, you only have to show the crowd a picture of the army and they will, as we say, get the picture. You only have to show them the picture of the emperor, and they will immediately quake at the thought of his power. That is why those who don't quake or who don't respect symbols such as flags are regarded as a threat to power, and power comes down on them and brings them back into line. The flag itself is a bit of cloth; the power and the nation for which it stands we think is embodied in it somehow; to disrespect it, is to disrespect the country. That is why when the early Christians were persecuted, they weren't actually

required to give up their religious beliefs by the Romans; they only had to sacrifice to a statue of the emperor. The Romans didn't care what you believed, as long as you understood and feared above all the power of the emperor as presented in his image, as long as you put the power of your God in second place. The Christians who refused to sacrifice to the emperor's image understood this very well. That is why they therefore refused to sacrifice anything but their own lives.

That helps us a lot in figuring out what Jesus was doing when he asked to see a coin, and then asked whose picture was on it. It wasn't just that the coin belonged to Caesar and had to be given back to Caesar. The deeper idea was that Caesar owned the guy who had it in his pocket. So whether you paid taxes or not was beside the point once it was established that you were in Caesar's pocket.

But that is only half of it. As one ancient commentator suggested, Caesar's is not the only image that comes into play in this story. Caesar is not the only one who has put on his image on things to suggest ownership. God has, too. For God's image is imprinted on every human being, and has been since creation, even if we have marred it time and time again. God, too, makes a claim of ownership by the imprint of his image. Thus, Jesus in asking the question about pictures and images is really forcing a bigger question than one about politics and taxes. He is asking: "Who are you and whose are you?" You can always tell the answer to that question by the images that you serve, and which image owns you, no matter what you say to the contrary.

So this story is not about parceling out what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. It is about to whom we belong *completely*, root and stock. It is about the images we carry around with us, but more importantly, that we carry within us. Those images remind us of what belongs to us, and to what we belong. The images of Caesar and the world that we carry around

externally and internally make that claim; so do the images of God. So the question that this passage poses to us is simply the question of “whose image and picture is it that we carry around?”

That is a question that I think we understand fairly instinctively, just as we understand Jesus’ point fairly instinctively, once we figure out what it is. We recognize, usually without a moment’s thought, images and the claims they make and lay down. We can take a brief look at an abstract image like a golden arch, and feel hungry – or not, as the case may be. A Jew can see a picture of Hitler and feel hatred without having to reflect; a slave can see the image of his master and feel fear. So, too, we can recognize the images that tell us whether somebody belongs in Caesar’s pocket, or whether he or she is in God’s image.

Now, determining whether one belongs to Caesar is not quite so easy these days as looking at the coins we have in our pocket and seeing if they bear Caesar’s image. I am not sure what it says about to whom I belong when I have a Sacajawewa dollar in my pocket. But there are a lot of other images that do betray Caesar’s ownership of us. For example, we recognize the conspicuous consumption that tries to impress us with the worldly power and taste of the consumer. Cars, clothes, houses, furniture, are often purchased with the idea of conveying one’s power and importance. In those cases, when we sense that that is why they were purchased, we know to whom the person belongs. But, of course, those things are sometimes ambiguous. What is the most obvious way to recognize Caesar’s ownership is to look at the image that is borne on people’s faces and on the face of their actions. Self-importance, wind-baggery, cruelty, arrogance are the images that faces belonging to Caesar bear on their surface; they eloquently testify to the one who really owns the persons behind them. We think when we wear them that they are masks and people can’t see us. What mask we wear, or that we choose to wear a mask at all, actually

speaks volumes about us,

The same sort of thing is true about those who belong to God and bear God's image. One philosopher when asked why she thought that Jesus was God Incarnate simply replied by saying that when she thought of Jesus she couldn't help but think about God. The same can be said about those who belong to God through his Son. We, of course, can't see God directly, just as Moses was not allowed to see God's face. We only see his traces, which is to say God's effects in the world. But those can be pretty obvious. We recognize the unseen God and the unseen God's presence very quickly and easily in kindness, dedication, loyalty, and above all in self-sacrifice. We recognize the difference, for example, between the sort of worldly giving that is the result of largesse, the sort of worldly grand gesture of generosity, and God's giving, the giving of one's very self, even to the point of one's own disadvantage. The person who has a face formed by those sorts of gracious acts bears a very different image than the person who has sought to burn Caesar's lines on his face by idolizing power and its instruments.

Let me bring this home in a very concrete way. In the next couple of months, this church will be deeply engaged in two very important inter-related tasks that will show the face that we are really presenting to the world.

The first is the stewardship campaign that we are asking you to think about beginning today. I want to make a single point about it. The opportunity to give and to advance Christ's mission is a spiritual opportunity. Now, I suppose everybody who is asking for money will tell you that it is an opportunity. But the point I want to get across, is that the church is not just another cause. It is not an opportunity to exhibit your largesse and importance. The church is what embraced you and brought you into God's heart. Its continuing mission is to bring the same grace to a very graceless world, and to bear an image of care and generosity in a world that lacks

both. If by baptism you are part of that mission, then this is the opportunity to bear the image of the God who claims you. It is an opportunity for spiritual growth because it is an opportunity to develop a certain kind of face, which, if sincere, the world can't miss. It is an opportunity, not to impress people with your largesse, but to become God's own.

The second task that we face this fall is the Mission Study preparatory to electing a Nominating Committee to recommend a new installed senior pastor. The study is *not* a matter of lining up opinions on what kind of person we would like to see in the pulpit here. It *is* a matter of asking one question, "What is Christ calling us to do here in Georgetown?" That is the question you are asked to think about for the next couple of months. It is a question that could also be put simply, "How can we best bear Christ's image?" Once you get the answer to that question down, then what sort of person you need as a partner in leadership will become fairly obvious. Now, the point I want to make about this process, is that it is your process. You have to ask, as the ones Christ has claimed in this place, what he wants you to do. You have to put yourselves on the line, examine yourselves, and just plain show up and contribute to answering the question about the mission of this church. In one sense, it is, of course, your mission. In a deeper sense, it is the mission that has been given to you. It is the invitation to consider what the face is that you will wear, and the image that you will bear.

Both of those tasks are vital to this church. But to say that they are is to say that both are important opportunities for you to show God's image to the world. Your generosity to this church, and your generosity to the world *as* Christ's church will say everything about the one to whom you really belong. Your discernment of Christ's mission in Georgetown, and not Caesar's in Washington, will, too.

So, for those reasons, friends, let us take to heart Christ's own admonition: "let your light

so shine before the world, that all may see it and give thanks to your Father who is in heaven.”