

“In the Image” based on Matthew 22:15-22 and Genesis 1:1-2, 26-27

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, Oct. 22, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Imagine yourself for a moment, on the streets of Jerusalem, near the ancient temple. The once quiet streets are buzzing with excitement. Not only is the Passover near, but a man has rode into town to the shouts of the people saying, “Save us,” “Hosanna.”

He rode a donkey as the Messiah would, and they are saying, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” It’s exciting to think that maybe Rome might be pushed out of power, but this man has no army, nor is he raising one, it seems. If he is going to free Judea from Roman rule, he’s going to have to unite the leaders of the different factions that are part of your ruling classes. And it seems he has united them, but not in opposition to Rome. He’s united them in opposition to him.

You see the Herodians and the Pharisees talking – this in and of itself is a kind of miracle. They are competing interests in your city – like two opposite opposed political parties. One group supports restoring a monarchy to govern Judean life. The other is adapting the law of God to a changing world, and that might mean living according to God’s principles without ever having a monarchy again. Now, instead of fighting each other in streetside arguments, they confront Jesus on the issue of Roman rule. It’s getting hot, and you know that at any minute, Roman soldiers may swoop in and break up the crowds. They don’t like it when the people congregate.

Several disciples of the Pharisees then approach Jesus, and they flatter him when just days before, their leaders challenged Jesus on his authority to teach, his authority to do miracles, and his authority to speak like a prophet. Now, these Pharisees in training ask him, “Is it permitted to pay tribute to Caesar, or not?”

It’s a trap. You know there are a handful of Roman soldiers at guard posts, now listening. You also know someone next to you could be a Roman informant milling about the crowd. Rome’s taxes are a burden that often feels like too much to bear. There was a small revolt in the city a few years earlier was put down violently, including by some operatives in the crowd acting like protesters. So, if Jesus says to pay the tax, he’ll be seen on the side of Caesar, and the people may just revolt against him. If he says not to pay the tax, he’ll be in Rome’s sights.

You hear Jesus call them hypocrites for asking the question, then he asks for a denarius. But who will give him one? You know that if you have one, your supposed to trade it in at temple, so that you have Judean coins instead, without Roman images or symbols. Yet, one of the Pharisees hands Jesus a coin, from his own coin purse. There it is – the Silver Denarius – worth a day’s wages, stamped with the profile of the emperor and inscribed, “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus.” The emperor claims to be the adopted son of a god, someone to be worshiped then himself. He is the source of all order in the state.

Then Jesus speaks, “Whose image is this? Whose inscription?” and they say, “Caesar’s.” It’s that word – image – you hear it and you remember the opening of the Torah, the story of God’s people and the action of God in your world. In his voice there is an echo of God’s voice, when it says, “Let us make a human in our image, according to our likeness.” Perhaps you know the story of Pompey some 90 years earlier, when he conquered Judea, and how he spared the temple from destruction, supposedly because he was amazed, when he walked into the holy of holies, where only the high priest was allowed to go. The center of the temple, there was no statue, No image of a god.

You know that your God is the God of all humanity, and all humanity is his image. It is not that you alone bear the image, or the king alone bears a divine image, but all people – and so you are not permitted to make idols to worship, because you and all of your neighbors already bear God’s image. And so, you now stand in amazement at Jesus’s response, “Give back the things of Caesar to Caesar, and give back the things of God to God.” You see the Pharisees and Herodians walk away. It’s over. For now.

Beloved, this is the backdrop of our Gospel reading today, and it is important. If we look at the context of this story, we see that it is about more than just taxes. This is about who we are as human beings made in the image and likeness of God. Jesus could have said, “Whose head is this?” as the NRSV translates it. But he doesn’t. The word we find is not “kephalos” for head, but “eikonos,” the Greek word for image. This is the word used to translate the Hebrew, “tselem,” and in both languages, this is the word for an image, as in an idol for a god.

What made the faith of the Hebrews, the Israelites, and now the Judeans so different, is that their God was never represented in an idol, because people already bear God’s image. In those other cultures, if the status of image was placed on a human being, it was placed on the king, the one who holds dominion over everyone like a god. The status of image was given to the one with power over others, who like a god, could speak, and have commands followed. But among the descendants of Israel, every single human being bears the image of God. Every human is called to have dominion and subdue, but not like the kings with force, but like God, to create, and sustain life.

Dominion for humanity, just like a status of image bearer, is not supposed to mimic the world by exploiting resources, conquering and subjugating people, and claiming power. No, this is what happens when people decide for themselves right and wrong. They exploit whatever sense of they have of their being like gods. Instead, the God of Israel creates out of love, sustains creation, redeems creation, rules without exploiting power, and in doing so, transforms creation. This is what it means to exercise dominion in the sense of Hebrew scripture. It is most often used in language, as a metaphor of a garden. You don’t dominate your garden. You want it to flourish. You care for it. That’s the image of dominion over the world we are supposed to have.

Jesus rejects the image of Caesar alone as divine and says to give that back to Caesar, and tells the people to give themselves, their whole selves, their own image, back to God, back to the service of God, to take up the rightful role. This is a role that is not of a subjugated people to human exploitation of power, but elevated to the place where you know you bear God’s image for all to see God’s image in you as you see God’s image in others. This coin is nothing, Jesus says, but you are everything. Caesar is not a god, but you bear God’s image.

Beloved, this is what we see in Jesus, who embodies the God of Israel. You see, he is the perfect, the complete image of God, fully the Son of God in our flesh, who being equal to God, did not exploit that power, but humbled himself to come in the form of someone who was enslaved, subject to worldly power. Yet he was obedient to divine will and the limits of our humanity, even to the point of death, death on a cross. Indeed, by his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, humanity is united with God in him, sin and death have been defeated, and we are all adopted heirs. We are adopted, but not like Tiberius to Caesar. We are adopted as heirs of the true God to receive life that is abundant and eternal, not as a reward, but to empower us to do God’s will without fear of death.

Beloved, you bear God's image – every human does. So it is by faith in Jesus Christ that for us the Holy Spirit lived in and among us as the church, giving us a share of the divine life to be shared by pouring love in our hearts. In Christ who shared our humanity, all of humanity is being reconciled to God. All of it. Every nation, every race, every ethnicity. Everyone.

Our task is to give ourselves, we who are made in God's image back to God. It's not about taxes, but a recognition that whatever we give to the world, belongs to the world. We are to live as image bearers for the ministry of reconciliation. This is because as God has reconciled humanity back to God in Christ, so we share in that role reconciling humanity with humanity. We give back to God who God who created us, loves us, sustains us, redeems us, transforms us, and rules us as our Lord, our God with us.

We cannot let even good things become false images of our God. That could be love of country or love of family, love of our heritage, or our affiliations. All of these things can become false gods, unless we participate in them first as knowing our allegiance is to God and not those things.

Beloved, the God who made everything around us – seen and unseen – is the all-powerful God who knows you and knows your name and loves you, having shared in your humanity with you in mind, to die for you, to rise for you, and to ascend to be your advocate within the very being of God, sending the Spirit to be with you here. This is because you have been made in the image and likeness of God. God shared your life, so you might share God's life.

Look in that mirror and see God with you. Look at your neighbor and see God with you. You are loved and bear God's image. Yes, only Christ was complete in being God, but we are made complete when we love others as Christ loves us, and give people a glimpse of Christ in us, while at the same time, we look upon others, those who love us and even those who hate us and recognize that all of humanity bears God's image. To be complete then for us is to give to God what is Gods, by being Christ to others and seeing Christ in others. Friends, let Caesar have the cash, give God what is truly valuable, you and all humanity. Amen.