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Matthew 22:15-22

BEARING THE IMAGE

The message from the story in today's reading from Matthew is not what it sounds like. The religious leaders come to Jesus with a trick question designed to entrap him. They ask Jesus whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the Roman emperor Caesar. Jesus asks to see a coin used to pay the tax and then he asks, "Whose image is on this coin." And the leaders answer, "It's the emperor's." And then Jesus delivers that famous quote: "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

It sounds like Jesus is telling us to separate the religious realm from the secular realm. And that is why some Christians have pointed to this passage to justify their position that politics and religion should operate in separate spheres and that politics should stay out of religion. That is what this story from Matthew *sounds* like. But that is *not* what Jesus means.

Jesus was put in a very awkward position by the religious leaders' question. If he answered "yes," it was lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, he would certainly offend a great many people. Remember, the Roman Empire was not a democratically elected government. The Roman Empire was an oppressively cruel occupying force over the Jewish people. And the Romans exacted excessively heavy taxes from these mostly impoverished people. On top of that, the coin Jesus asked to see not only bore the image of the Emperor, but also bore an inscription honoring the Emperor's divinity. As a result, some Jewish people regarded the use of such coins as participation in idolatry. So if Jesus said "yes," it was lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, he would outrage many people.

On the other hand, if Jesus answered, “no,” he would quickly find himself in deep trouble with the Romans for treason.

Faced with what seems to be a no-win situation, Jesus gives what seems to be an evasive but very clever answer: Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s. To our ears, it sounds like Jesus is suggesting separate realms: the religious realm and the secular realm. We hear it this way because we modern Christians are accustomed to dividing our world into these separate spheres. But this is a thoroughly modern mindset that would have been quite foreign to Jesus’ first audience.

In Jesus’ world, there was no separation of the religious from the secular. That would have been a ludicrous idea. Just think about it: where would you draw the line between Caesar’s jurisdiction and God’s jurisdiction? It couldn’t be done. And so when Jesus makes that statement, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” his first audience would have understood that while it may *sound* evasive, Jesus was really giving a very clear answer: it all belongs to God! It all belongs to God. Far from suggesting a separation of realms—a political realm here, and a personal realm here, and a professional realm here, and a social realm here, and a financial realm here, and a spiritual realm here, as we are inclined to do—Jesus reinforces the unification of our hearts and lives in our allegiance to God.

This story today is about human allegiances. Caesar wanted his subjects’ allegiance. In fact, Caesar compelled his subjects’ allegiance. But Jesus’ answer reminded everyone listening where their true allegiance lay: give to God the things that belong to God.

We live in a world where everyone competes for our allegiance. Manufacturers and advertising companies compete for our allegiance to their products. Sports teams seek our allegiance. Our employers want our allegiance. And most definitely, as we know in this election

season, politicians want our allegiance. Whose side are you on? With whom are you aligned? To whom do you offer your loyalty? In other words, whose image do you bear?

There are all kinds of Caesars out there in the world--products, politicians, employers, political parties, nations, ethnic groups, religious communities, even our families—all kinds of worldly powers and entities that want our allegiance. And to be sure, some of these are very worthwhile and important communities and institutions. But let us remember that God and Caesar are not equals.

God's image is not imprinted on any coin. Instead, it is imprinted upon us. *We* bear God's image. That is what the world sees when it looks at us. We bear God's image wherever we live or operate—in all of our social, political, economic, professional, and religious spheres.

If we want to know what the image of God looks like, or at least *should* look like, we have only to look to Jesus. Jesus is our model for what bearing the image of God into this world means. It means caring for the least and forgotten. It means forgiving and giving second chances. It means extending grace to others. It means giving and sharing our lives and our resources with others. It means standing up against injustice. It means loving people, even those who are hard to love.

We do not belong to Caesar. We belong to God. And belonging to God has powerful implications.

In one week, on Stewardship Sunday, we here at UPC will turn in our pledge cards with our financial commitments to the church for the next year. How we decide to use our money, for what purposes, and how much we will give are ways we bear the image of God in this world.

In two weeks, we will be stepping into the voting booths to cast our ballots for leaders of our nation. How we vote, for which leaders and for what concerns, are also ways we bear God's image in this world.

In a month and a half, we will be barraged with the TV ads and the catalogs in the mail, all trying to sell us the joy of Christmas. How we choose to find joy and how we choose to celebrate the birth of the Savior are other ways we bear the image of God into the world.

Today, we will walk away from this time of worship and face the daily challenges and tasks of our lives. How we live in the ordinary times and interact with those around us are yet other means by which we bear the image of God into the world.

“Give to God the things that are God's,” Jesus tells us. That means you and me and our lives and all that we have and all that we do, and our financial behavior, and our political behavior, and our relationships, and our professional lives. It all belongs to God.