

WHAT CURRENCY DO YOU INVEST IN?

Genesis 1:26-28; Matthew 22:15-22

The Pharisees think they have found a way to entrap Jesus. This isn't a new thing. Time after time they have engaged with Jesus in ways that they hope will expose him as less authoritative than them, as weaker than them, and in ways that will show them to be more worthy and righteous. And as we heard from Matthew's gospel today, the Pharisees have plotted out what they believe to be the perfect plan to entrap Jesus with a question about paying taxes.

So what's the plan they have plotted? It's helpful to know a bit about the context of taxes at this time. Palestine was a colony of the Roman Empire, and the Jews were paying taxes that supported the army and government that occupied their country. And, like many folks even today, the Jewish people had some grievances around the question of taxation. And, perhaps not surprisingly, there were differences of opinion even among the Jewish people themselves on this subject: there were those who supported the Romans and those who did not. In this case it was the Herodians who supported the Roman government and the Pharisees who opposed it. So, we might assume that, due to their divided loyalties, the Herodians and the Pharisees didn't typically choose to work in partnership. However, the two groups put aside their differences and joined forces in this plot to entrap Jesus. They ask the question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

The Herodians supported paying tax to Caesar. If Jesus answered the question saying "No, it is not lawful to pay taxes" then they could accuse him of being a seditionist, of being someone who encourages rebellion against the state. The Pharisees did not support paying taxes to Caesar for religious reasons. Their grievance here was less about the Roman occupation and more about the physical coins that were used to pay taxes. Upon each coin was the image of "the divine Caesar." The image and words on the coin were used to denote Caesar as the son of God; divine; a ruler by divine purpose. This, of course, was a problem for the Pharisees who followed Jewish law by the letter. There was but one God and Caesar was most certainly not that God, was not divine. For them, the idea of Caesar being divine was blasphemous. So, if Jesus was to say "yes, it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar," it would drive home for the Pharisees that Jesus does not put God above all else, thereby making Jesus a religious fraud.

So, when the two groups approach Jesus, they are rather smug; they are sure they have Jesus cornered and no matter what he answers it will remove him from the scene and disperse his followers.

But Jesus catches them all off guard by providing a response that completely rearranges their challenge. He asks them to show him the coin used for the tax and asks them to state aloud whose head and title the coin bears. They answer, "The emperor's." Then he says to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21)

While this answer is impressive because it gets Jesus out of being indicted, it is also impressive because it only takes a coin for Jesus to turn what seemed like a question with only one answer into a question that opens up many possibilities for how the world can live as both good citizens and as religious followers of a divine Lord.

What does a coin tell us about who we are? Think of the coins in your wallet or on your bedside table or in the cup holder in your car. Perhaps most obviously, they remind us that we are Canadian, or live in Canada, since it is a currency that is only useful in this country. But when we begin to examine the images on them, more stories come forward. The Queen of England's head indicates ties to the British monarchy. In fact, the inscription around the Queen's head, which has traditionally been included on all Canadian currency, is the Latin phrase D•G•REGINA, or Dei Gratia Regina, meaning "Queen, by the Grace of God." The inclusion of the Queen, and other royals before her, also reminds us of our history of colonialism and the ways this land has changed physically, socially, economically from the early 1600s until today. We may also recall that coinage didn't exist in what we now call Canada before the French and British arrived here. The animals on our coins might serve as a reminder of our connection to and treatment of—for better or worse—the wildlife, natural resources, lands and waters that have always been here. It is a reminder of the Indigenous peoples who originally inhabited the land, but also of the way our ethnic landscape has changed across this nation over time, and our complex history as a nation.

Our coins can tell stories. They play a part in our country's past and present, and all because they bear images that, in different ways, help to represent Canada. But they also remind us that we pay our taxes to Canada. We give to Canada what is Canada's so that we can continue to tell the stories—both the good and the bad—of this nation. So that we can continue to have universal health care, arts programmes, public education, parks, roads, emergency services, libraries, employment insurance, social assistance. There's no denying that by playing our part in paying taxes we are supporting one another in so many ways across this country.

But Jesus' response to his challengers also asks us to consider what bears God's image. We have a civic duty to uphold, but we also have a duty to God. And we know this even though God's image isn't on a coin. We know this because God's image is imprinted in us; because we bear God's divine image. And in the same way that a coin can tell us stories of the history of our nation based on a few images, so too does God's imprint on us tell stories about our entire being; it tells us about the One who created us, who is our source and our destination.

So, what does it mean to be made in the image of God? We hear in Genesis that God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). We so often focus on "image" as a visual, tangible representation: what we look like, what we wear, what what we ingest, where we work, what we own. What if we thought of "image" as those intangible qualities of God that are gifted to us: love, compassion, a desire for relationship, minds and hearts set on justice, the fruits of the Spirit.

Being created in God's image is less about what physical characteristics we have and how much those may or may not be like God. Rather, being created in God's image means being a reflection of God's love and having the ability to carry that love and share it readily. It means loving God and loving our neighbours. As God's created beings, we are given this incredible gift to know love and to develop our use and understanding of that love.

We know stories from the Bible where images of gods, or idols, are carved out and worshipped, even by the Israelites who are supposedly God's chosen people. But it's not so hard to see where those who worship idols are coming from. We sometimes want these idols to be the images we are cast to look like: images covered in gold and silver, images that are tangible and understandable, images that emphasize wealth and abundance. But the image of God is different. There is no single set image for God—no cows carved out of gold. Instead, God's image is in billions of places—in every member of humankind. You can't reduce the Creator down to any one thing in Creation.

God makes humans in God's image *and* gives them dominion, or authority, over all of creation. Being made in God's image, each human has the capacity to love right inside, it is an automatic install. But it is up to each human, each of us, to decide if that love and authority over creation will be used to serve the fish and birds, the plants and trees, the land and seas, and one another, and thereby work to build God's kingdom here on earth—remembering what God deemed "good" when God first created. Or, we can use

that authority to define good and evil for ourselves. To use that love within us to serve only ourselves and build systems that will provide more power for the few.

There have been many conversations about Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon and richest person in the world, and his recent space flight. Questions loom about how someone with so much money could ignore the human needs on earth in favour of developing space flight for the super-wealthy. As the person who controls Amazon and all its subsidiaries, Bezos holds a great deal of power, not just over his employees, but over all of us who purchase or partake in the products he owns—which is far more than just Amazon: do you eat from Whole Foods? Check the movie database IMDb? Rate books on Goodreads? Ask Alexa questions? It's all part and parcel in the big Bezos picture. In fact, a writer for *The Atlantic* likened Bezos' space travel to "surveying his kingdom, and adding one more dimension to his realm."

Power is one of the issues facing the Jewish people of the first century, too. Caesar holds a strong desire for power over others. But Jesus doesn't work in that realm. So then, what does it mean, as Jesus says, to "give to God the things that are God's"? It is the task of all of us to rule and participate in building God's kingdom, and that cannot happen when power is at the centre. Love must be at the centre; Jesus, God's gift in love, must be at the centre. Caesar can stamp his picture and lineage far and wide, but he cannot come near the true commerce that animates us. Caesar may receive many coins through taxation and power and privilege, and he may be flattered by how well his likeness is displayed in cold, hard cash; but the coin of the realm of our flesh and blood is the image of God. What is rendered to God is whatever bears the divine image. Every life is marked with that inscription. And that, Caesar does not have access to.

As we open ourselves more and more to this image making a deeper mark on us, it transforms us to be ever more reflective of God's image. If we open our hearts in faith to the image of God within, our purpose becomes one of creating relationships of caring, compassionate and just love. The compassion of God for God's children is the product of our commerce, the inspiration for all the giving we do. It's the currency we choose to invest in.

True, the image of God can sometimes be difficult to recognize. When we look at each other, or in the mirror, we tend to see the inscriptions that our business with the world has left on us: you are what you look like, what you have, what you wear, what you do, the company you keep. Nevertheless, underneath all those inscriptions is a much deeper mark, and when we pay attention and begin to see the image that God sees, we come to accept that we are so much more than our country or our currency or our

politics or the pressures of the world around us; we are children of God, a God who has inscribed our name on the palm of their hands; a God that helps us to not only recognize who we are, but whose we are. May we always remember that while our coins may tell some stories, the inscriptions in our hearts and on God's hands are the places that tell the story of how deeply God cares for us. Amen.