

Sermon for October 18, 2020

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Sermon Texts: Exodus 33: 12-23 and Matthew 22: 15-22

Sermon Title: *Faces*

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Lord, you know us intimately, so intimately that we are inscribed on the palms of your hands. We have come to worship you this morning, the one whose image is imprinted on our hearts. Be with us Lord, in all your majesty and holiness and may our worship be pleasing to you. Amen.

Prayer of Illumination:

God our helper, By your Holy Spirit, open our minds, that as the scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may be led into your truth and taught your will, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jesus is under attack. The conflicts between Jesus and his enemies have been steadily building in Matthew, and now it reaches a fever pitch. His opponents set a political snare to entrap him: *Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to emperor, or not?* Jesus proves to be slicker than his enemies. He answers the question with a game changer: *Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.* But what does that mean? What does belonging to Caesar mean?

Government is always a mixed bag. Rome built great roads and sewer systems, but also crucified people and sent troops into Jerusalem to destroy it. One of the reasons Rome survived for 1000 years was that it was tolerant of many different religions and gods but persecuted those who swore allegiance to one God –Yahweh. Americans are highly skeptical about our government as we approach the November 3rd election. We are suspicious of the two different versions of America that the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates offer. It's confusing. How can we be so far apart when all of us would probably argue that we have the best system of government in the world?

The people of Palestine had more to complain about than we do. They were being taxed, not by a government they had elected, but one that was an occupying force. As long as there are governments of any sort or any political party, we will be faced with the same question: How do I parse my loyalties to God and to country? What belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar?

Here's the dilemma, and also the truth. Nothing really belongs to the emperor. Everything belongs to God. Jesus changes the focus of the argument from money to worship. Jesus skillfully steers the conversation into forbidden territory for the Pharisees. "God" and "graven image" are mutually exclusive terms for Jews. Remember the Second Commandment about graven images and our lesson from last week when Moses was on the mountain with God and

the people turned to idolatry? The graven image on the coin would be the equivalent of the Golden Calf.

The coin had the image of Caesar on it, and the Jewish leaders who were carrying coins were engaging in a form of idolatry. In any case, they were not supposed to have money in the temple. Notice that Jesus does not have a coin. He has to ask for one. So by the time the coin is produced, the argument is really over. Jesus could have said *Gottcha!* Instead, he diffuses the situation and calls people back to God.

There's no easy description of what it looks like to be called back to God. There is a spiritual dimension to all the decisions we make about money, because even what we give to Caesar is really God's stuff. In a sense no one can escape Caesar. The Israelites are compromised because the coin of the realm breaks the First and Second Commandments; the Israelites, by using the coins bearing Caesar's image, are complicit in the Roman oppression of the people.

We had an interesting discussion in the lectionary group this week about the extent it is possible to escape government today; most concluded that it was impossible because even those who live off the grid still use the roads and some of the services that government provides. So, we, like the Israelites, are compromised to some extent. That's one of the reasons I believe that the spiritual discipline of tithing and giving first fruits to God is the best way to keep our values biblical and to prevent us from idolatry.

Have you ever noticed that scripture contains lots of body parts: faces, back, and hands? And tattoos. That's right! God has at least one tattoo – on the palms of God's hands. The prophet Isaiah once described God's intimate connection with us by repeating God's question to him: *Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands* (*Isaiah 49: 15-16*). And God's image is imprinted on each one of us as well, because creation bears God's image and we, as God's creatures, are imprinted with God's image. There's a deep connection between our creator and us.

Makes the Emperor look pretty small and insignificant, doesn't it? The Emperor's lack of compassion for his people is in stark contrast with God's image as a nursing mother whose baby's face is already tattooed on the palm of her hand. God's image is imprinted on us and we are imprinted on God's hands. Because this is so, we are called to look like God in all that we do.

In the Exodus reading for today, Moses seems unsure of the future, even though God has already led the Israelites out of Egypt and given them the Ten Commandments. *How shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us?* Moses asks. Then Moses continues to press God: *Show me your glory, I pray.* In other words, let me see your face. But God's glory is so great that no one can see God's face and live. God protects Moses by hiding him the cleft of a rock and covers him by God's own hand as God passes by. Moses' God is also our God.

We are living in uncharted territory in America right now. But the chaos we are experiencing with the Corona virus and with political division gives us the opportunity to recreate ourselves, to innovate, and to change our priorities. We have the opportunity to drive less, to eat differently, to educate our children differently, to reconfigure higher education. We will certainly use technology differently.

As Christians, we hope that what emerges might be more compassionate towards the marginalized, the out-of-work, the under-employed. Bu Caesar will always be Caesar, even in a democracy. What is legal is not always compassionate; what is lawful is not always just. Is it compassionate and just that corporate heads pay fewer taxes than you and I do? We have the opportunity to change tax laws so everyone pays a fair tax.

Martin Luther wrote: *I have held many things in my hand and have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands that I still possess.* That decision rests with us as well. Whom do I trust? In whom do I put my ultimate faith? Whose image do I bear? Do people see in me God's face or Caesar's face?

Someone once asked a rabbi what the face of God looked like. The rabbi replied: *God's face looks like the faces of all the people who have loved us.* I have seen the face of God in my parents, my friends and siblings, and in your faces. The face of God is reflected in our faces in the choice of the God we serve. May we all choose in every word we speak, every action we take, and every emotion of our hearts, the face of God and not of Caesar. Amen.