



Image is Everything – TouchPoint for October 14, 2020

Matthew 22:15-22 (MSG)

Then the Pharisees plotted a way to trap him into saying something damaging. They sent their disciples, with a few of Herod's followers mixed in, to ask, "Teacher, we know you have integrity, teach the way of God accurately, are indifferent to popular opinion, and don't pander to your students. So tell us honestly: Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

Jesus knew they were up to no good. He said, "Why are you playing these games with me? Why are you trying to trap me? Do you have a coin? Let me see it." They handed him a silver piece. "This engraving—who does it look like? And whose name is on it?" They said, "Caesar." "Then give Caesar what is his, and give God what is his." The Pharisees were speechless. They went off shaking their heads.

Grace and peace from the mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

"Whose image is on the coin? Return to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

Two words stand out for me from this passage. "Render, or Return", and "Image".

Jesus is asking us to render to Caesar and God. What is interesting is that he doesn't mention we are to render anything to ourselves. Did you catch that?

And it's especially important when it comes to money, because if there is one thing I have learned in growing up in this country, it's that it is MY MONEY. Not yours, not theirs, and certainly not the government's. But here is Jesus, saying if it has the image of the government and its leaders on it... it belongs to them.

Which I suppose in one way makes sense. I mean after all, it's not my picture on the dollar bills. And it's not backed by the full faith and credit of me. And it's probably safe to assume that if I tried to pay you with a piece of paper that had my picture on it and was backed by the full faith and credit of me, you probably wouldn't accept it.

So, it really isn't my money after all. I have exchanged MY time and MY talents for a socially acceptable form of trade that keeps the economy moving along. By the way, if you actually think it is your money and not the government's, just remember this. It is legal to burn the flag in this country, but illegal to burn money. What do you think that says about our country's priorities?

So according to Jesus, we shouldn't complain about paying taxes. Hmm, I wonder how that would go over in a political commercial. "Hi, I'm John Candidate and I'm here to raise your taxes because Jesus says that's your Christian duty. And you will like it!"

Or how about this, "Complaining about paying taxes is un-Christian, it's a sin." I don't think you're going to hear that in any stewardship sermons this Fall.

But here is Jesus, telling us that whatever image is on something, that is who that thing belongs to.

And here is where it becomes interesting. We don't just render or return things to Caesar, but to God. So now, whatever has God's image on it belongs to God.

And you don't have to go very far in the biblical story to read about the image of God. Chapter 1 of Genesis

if I recall. You and I are made in God's image. You and I have God's image stamped on us. So now, not only does our money not belong to us, but we don't even belong to us.

And the idea that I shared earlier about me exchanging MY talents and MY time for the government's money, well, I can't even say that anymore. Because MY talents and MY time ARE NOT my talents and my time. They belong to God.

And I am reminded once again of a passage from Deuteronomy chapter 8,

17 Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." 18 But remember the LORD your God, for it is God who gives you power to get wealth..."

OK, this is getting kind of irritating...and kind of undoing the basic understanding of life I have gotten from living 62 years in this country. You know, that everything comes down to me, myself, and I. That it is all up to me as an individual...to do everything I can with what is MINE!!! And now, with this bible passage...

It isn't just my money that doesn't belong to me. I don't even belong to me. Neither does my time, my talent, my energies. None of it can I claim for myself.

And this doesn't just apply to money. It applies to people as well. We need to see other people from the image that is imprinted on them. And that is the image of God. It is not the image stamped on their passport. It is not the image stamped on their birth certificate of the country in which they were born. The image that is stamped on them and supersedes all images is the image of God that has been stamped on each and every human being living on this planet.

This needs to be the starting point for the church's approach to the world. We have to offer something more than "We're right and you're wrong." We have to offer something more than conversion or condemnation.

We need to start at a point of connection. That you and I and the world have had the image of God stamped on all of us. And therefore, all belong to God. All belong, from the beginning of our and their existence.

If this passage doesn't shake the foundations of your basic understanding of life. I don't know what will.

OK, I will just speak for myself.

This passage is like an earthquake to my common assumptions of life. It shakes to the core the basic attitude I carry about life. It is a Copernican revolution around the basic relationship between me and the world... Me and God.

I keep thinking, what do I need to give back? What are my obligations back to the world? But the problem with all those thoughts is that they all start with the assumption that it is all mine...and then have me focus on what I need to give from what is mine.

This passage forces me to focus on what I have been given... And the answer to that is everything. I have been given life. I have been given time. I have been given gifts and skills. I have even been given a country that has the strongest currency in the world in which I can trade the time and talent I have been given.

So now the question isn't, "What do I need to give" but rather, "what am I going to return – of what isn't mine to begin with?" "What am I going to return to God, this earth, this world, and its inhabitants"

Or to put it another way, "What am I going to keep for myself – of what isn't mine to begin with?" Man, that sounds so selfish...even at a 10% tithe... I'm keeping 90% of what isn't mine to begin with.

Yuck, I hate this text.

The Pharisees come to Jesus asking him what is right to give...

Jesus asks them to look at what they have been given.

I don't know if this fits, but I remember having a conversation with a woman in seminary who had come out of a Baptist tradition. We were talking about altar calls at the end of a worship service and I said "We don't have those in the Lutheran church." She responded, "Yes we do."

"No, we don't" ... "Yes, we do" ... "Nuh-uh" ... "Yeah Uh." On and on it went. You get the idea. Finally, I looked at her and said, "When have you ever seen an altar call in the Lutheran church? Ever?"

She just looked at me and smiled, "Every week," she said, "It's called communion, you idiot...Only you don't give your life to Jesus, he gives his life to you."

Life is strange. I was taught how to be a Lutheran from a Baptist.

I was taught how to not focus on what I need to give, but on what has been given to me.

So that's why it is so important to me to come to this meal every week. To constantly be reminded of what I have been given: the body and blood of Christ. Forgiveness, healing, and hope.

In the bread and the wine, the image of God that was imprinted on me in my creation is once again imprinted on me as I take in the body and blood of Jesus.

The body and blood of Christ. Given for me. Given to me. Given in me.

Given.....

And now... returning from this time together and back into the world ... is just the beginning of my 'returning' to God and the world...

...what wasn't mine to begin with.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Song

Be Still

Be Still, know that I am God.

Children of the Heavenly Father

Children of the heavenly Father, safely in his bosom gather. Nestling bird nor star in heaven, such a refuge e're was given. God his own doth tend and nourish, in His Holy courts they flourish. From all evil things he spares them, in His mighty arms He bears them. Neither life nor death shall ever, from the Lord, His children sever. Unto them His grace he showeth and their sorrows all he knoweth. Though He giveth or He taketh, God His children ne're forsaketh. His the loving purpose solely, to preserve them pure and holy.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

The Lord's Prayer

The Meal

Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God

Create in me a clean heart, O God. And renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence and take not thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with thy free spirit.

Benediction

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord lift His countenance upon you. And give you peace...The Lord make his face to shine upon you. And be gracious unto you. The Lord be gracious, gracious unto you. Amen