

29th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Whose Image is on our Coins?”

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Most people know that Abraham Lincoln is on the penny and that George Washington is on the quarter, but from there it gets fuzzy for a lot of people. On the nickel, the image is...Thomas Jefferson. On the dime...Franklin Delano Roosevelt. And the half dollar... John F. Kennedy. Who here knew all that? Who here is lying? I only mention it because Jesus takes a coin and asks the rhetorical question, “Whose image is on this coin?” The answer was of course, “Caesar’s”. OK, which one? Truth is no one knows for certain however historians mostly agree that the coin in question was a Roman denarius, a tribute coin, with the image and inscription, “Caesar Augustus Tiberius, Son of the Divine Augustus”.

I think it is important to note that, for the Jews of Jesus’ day, the necessity of having to use these coins felt like sand in the wound. The coins in circulation reminded them daily that they were a conquered people. King Herod was just the head of a puppet government set up by Rome. And like any occupied people, the only people that were despised more than the occupiers were the collaborators. And so, when our Gospel reading tells us that the Pharisees teamed up with the Herodians with the question regarding the use of these coins, it is a trap.

The best traps use a touch of honey. Watch how they begin by trying to butter Jesus up with compliments. They say to Jesus, "we know you are a truthful man". And then the tricky question: “Is it lawful to pay the census tax or not?” It didn't matter how Jesus responded to the question. It is a classic damned if you do or damned if you don't kind of question. If Jesus said yes, it is lawful to pay the census tax, the Herodians would have been very happy (Jesus was now one of them) but the rest of Israel would have wanted Jesus' head because he would have made himself out to be a Roman collaborator. If Jesus said no, it is not lawful to pay the census tax, then most of Israel would have been happy with Jesus, but the Herodians, not to mention the Romans, would have had an excuse to arrest him right then and there. Either answer, yes or no, would have had a mob of people calling for Jesus' death. This is exactly what the Pharisees wanted to have happen and why they ask Jesus this question with the Herodians present.

Jesus, knowing their malice asks for a coin that pays the census tax. They handed him a Roman coin. Jesus asked them, "whose image is this and whose inscription?" They of course replied, "Caesar's". Jesus then says something very clever and yet profound, "Well then, repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God". This diffused the situation with humor. And with that moment of wit, Jesus foiled the Pharisee's plan of entrapping him. We could end here with a great deal of respect at Jesus' cleverness but this isn't the point of the Gospel reading. There is something more wonderful happening here.

You see, a common misunderstanding of the text is that Jesus is drawing a line between two different spheres, the political sphere and the religious sphere, a division between Church and state, give to Caesar what is due Caesar and God what is due God, as if we are to weigh them separately. And although there is such a thing as a healthy idea of separation of Church and state, this is not what Jesus was getting at. Why? Ask yourself, who does Caesar belong to anyway? Whose image and likeness was he created in? The correct answer: God! Caesar, like everyone else in God's creation, belongs to God. Because God has made us, we owe to God everything we have, everything we are, have been or will be. Therefore, when Jesus says repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God, whether Caesar, the Pharisees or the Herodians liked it or not, they all belong to God and are therefore on to give God what is due God. So are we. Follow?

This insight is something we should think about when it comes to our relationships. You see, Jesus calls us to see the face of God in everybody, from the people we work with, to the people we live with, the people we see on the news, the people who live on the streets, and even the person we see in the mirror each morning. And this can be hard to do at times because we are sinners. Jesus is asking us, whose image is on our coins? The irony of the Gospel is every human that has ever been conceived on this earth is made in the image and likeness of God, that's Genesis chapter 1:26-27. When we look at any coin or any person we encounter, we see a glimpse of our Creator however imperfectly. Once we understand that everything belongs to God, we understand the deeper discipleship Jesus is calling us to.

And so, following this analogy, we are God's currency. Think about that for a moment! We are God's currency. We bear his image and likeness. In the marketplace of life, we are God's investment in this creation. God has given us free will for we are made in his image and likeness. As God's currency, in the time we have, we can invest ourselves properly into God's creation as disciples of Jesus or we can invest ourselves poorly by the choices we make. Can we articulate the ways that our lives are a good investment in God's creation right now? Can we be honest with ourselves and articulate the ways our lives are not producing treasure in heaven at the moment? My friends, we do not have all the time in the world on how we spend our lives, and so the Gospel's sincerest recommendation this weekend: Invest well.