

## Image Bearers

There's an old saying in the Middle East that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Listening in this week to the Senate hearings for the next Supreme Court Justice gave some insight into that saying.

Did you notice how many traditional Republicans, people who, 4 years ago, wouldn't be caught dead with the current president, are now lining up with him to push a nominee they believe will help achieve their political objectives?

Even the sometimes outliers, like Senator Romney, heeding the adage that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," are walking the line on this one.

And so I chuckle when folks mention that the Bible is just a bunch of cobwebbed stories that have nothing to say to our ultra modern, high tech, politically savvy world.

Because the same scene that's playing out in Washington DC this week, is exactly what's playing out in today's gospel lesson.

Once again, we're presented with two strange bedfellows!

Instead of Romney and Trump, we have the Herodians and the Pharisees.

Folks who usually loath one another.

Think of the Herodians as the most liberal of tax and spend Democrats.

Herod, that weak chinned glutton who has John the Baptist killed on the whim of his new wife, and her shimmering daughter, holds power by the grace of Rome.

So he collects their taxes and lavishly spends those tax dollars all for the glory of Rome, ensuring that he stays in Caesar's good graces.

These Herodians have nothing in common with the Pharisees.

They, like some of our Tea Party friends, see the big government of Rome as the great oppressor.

An oppressor with the chutzpah to demand taxes paid from the bounty of the land – land given by God Almighty to the Jewish people.

Who see Herod as nothing more than a sellout, a fake Jew.

So you can understand why these two groups have nothing in common.

Except this.

They both find in Jesus a threat to their way of life.

A fascinating thing really, because these folks are so far apart on just about everything you can think of.

Yet Jesus threatens them both.

Perhaps it's another way of saying that the presence of God – in the midst of humanity – threatens all of us.

It doesn't seem to matter who we are or what we think or why.

The presence of God is deeply threatening to something basic in humanity.

That need to run the show.

That need to be in control.

That need to say this is good and that is evil.

The shape those choices take, the ideology that motivates them, the politics behind it all, don't seem to really matter much.

It's the insistence on making those choices that seems to put us on a collision course with God.

And so these new found friends have come up with a good one!

A "gotcha" question for the ages.

One which imposes the black and white choice that our best thinking so often leads to.

It's a question that demands, as the lawyers like to say: "Just 'yes' or 'no' sir, just 'yes' or 'no.'"

Since, if Jesus says "don't pay the tax," that's grounds for immediate arrest and execution as a revolutionary.

And if he says "pay the tax," the very folks who follow him, those knocked down by the oppression of Rome, they'll desert him.

By golly, these fellows are smart!

Except they forget that Jesus is captivated by God.

And as God's captive, reality looks entirely different from what we say reality is.

For a long time, many people take the famous line "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" as a neat and tidy way to organize their lives.

Give Caesar our public life, and all that goes with it.

All the taxes and military service.

All of our occupations and protecting the status quo.

Our redlining.

Our privilege.

Our rights and benefits.

That's what we give to Caesar.

Which leaves precious little for God — merely our private, personal, spiritual lives.

What makes that interpretation so attractive is that it neatly divides our life into highly organized boxes, at the price of keeping God out of most of my day-to-day decisions, interactions, choices and obligations.

By creating a really big box for my regular life.

And a really small box for the God stuff.

But what if Jesus isn't talking about boxes at all?

What if Jesus is reaching for far more?

What if he's making yet another claim on the entirety of our entire lives?

On the whole of our being?

Even as we struggle to live those lives in the dog eat dog world that so often defines our daily existence?

As we try to navigate systemic evil.

Even as we struggle with pandemic and economic chaos.

Jesus, even under these circumstances, reaches into that core human need to be in control, and invites us to see another way.

Like, “to save our lives, we must lose them, for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel.”

And, “one cannot serve two masters, because she will love the one and hate the other,” so that you and I cannot serve both God and money.

And, that in the midst of all of our justified worries about making ends meet and having food on the table and money in the retirement account – can we stop to remember that God knows the number of hairs on our head?

Maybe that’s why Jesus insists that his challengers say out loud whose image is on that coin.

The coin bears Caesar’s image.

Give the coin to the one whose image it bears.

But what of us?

Whose image do we bear?

You know.

It’s right there in Genesis:

“God created humanity in God’s own image, in the divine image God created them....” Gen. 1:27.

So perhaps what Jesus is getting at is something like this:

"That which Caesar makes, give to Caesar; that which God makes, give to God."

Caesar makes coins.

Give the coin maker his coins!

But God makes you!

Give yourself, all of you, to God.

Which sounds great on a Sunday morning sitting in on the service, or preaching it from this chair.

But what happens when the rubber meets the road?

When we leave this place and return to the world of competition?

Of wars and rumors of wars?

Of COVID 19 incompetence?

And racism.

And fighting over who gets taxed and why?

All of that just plain human messiness.

In that world, this world, how are we to live?

It is, in all reality, a problem that we who profess Jesus as our Lord, face on a daily basis.

And yet the Gospel does not leave us orphans.

There is guidance.

There is a way.

It's just that its guidance is so very different from what I myself usually come up with.

Blessed are the meek.

The gentle.

The peacemakers.

If you are forced to walk a mile, walk two.

If anyone begs from you, give.

Love your enemy.

Pray for those who persecute you.

Don't return violence with violence.

Be willing even to die rather than kill.

All of this is the foolishness of God.

Foolishness that is true wisdom.

The only path to real life.

When we live it in the midst of all the messiness that is human life, God's foolishness scrubs off the grit and grime of doing things our way.

So that in the scrubbing, the image of God that is imprinted in you, in me, slowly yet stubbornly, begins to shine from the inside out.

Transforming even the worst of us into that which we are created to be.

St. Augustine says it so beautifully:

“Become who you already are.”

And as we become in our own lives the image of the living God, perhaps then we shall come to know what belongs to Caesar...

...and who belongs to God.

+amen