

## **Giving to God What is God's October 18, 2020**

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

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

For my sermon today, I'd like to reflect with you on the theme of giving to God what is God's! When I told Issa what I thought I'd be preaching about, he texted back immediately with the suggestion for hymn we'll be singing in a bit. "To God who Sits on the Throne. Be Blessing and Honor and Glory and Power forever." Indeed, this is a large part of what it means to give to God what is God's! Give God the glory! When we do, and when we can make it a daily practice, I think we can find therein a source of strength and hope and power and joy that I for one am needing these days now more than ever. First, let's see in our passage what leads Jesus to say these words: give to God the things that are God's.

Now I bet I know what some of you were thinking when you first heard our passage. 'He's gonna talk about Trump and his infuriating, puny IRS tab!' I mean how could I not? It's right there. Slam dunk! Yes, we could spend our time talking about tax evasion or for that matter tax resistance. The text has been used to justify both. Or we could zoom out just a bit and talk about when it is or isn't appropriate for Christians and people of conscience to submit to or resist state authority. Again, a timely topic. By the same token, we could easily fall into to the either/or, absolutist mindset of the religious authorities who are trying to trap Jesus with a gotcha question that he can't win. If Jesus speaks against paying taxes, he risks jail or death. He's not ready for that. Not yet. If he says, "pay the taxes," well, he risks losing the 'spiritual and religious base,' you know that small but strategically important demographic who have been following his counter-cultural message since he used to bang nails with his dad in Nazareth. Maybe it's the way the media has warped my mind to see everything through a political lens and how it's made us all pundits, but I can't help but see part of this controversy as reminiscent of recent debate and campaign rhetoric. To it all, I say 'no thanks!' The text itself says their trying to entrap him. Fortunately, Jesus doesn't fall for it and neither should we. Instead, he pivots to a deeper spiritual invitation and so should we. Rather than playing their game of comparing allegiances between the rules of the synagogue vs the rules of the state, instead he changes the game. Check it out.

Notice first how he starts on their terms. He asks them to pull out a coin used for taxes. When they present one to him, he exposes the fact that they themselves are already trafficking in the currency of the empire. Their questions lack integrity. But like the master teacher and rabbi he is, he turns their misstep into an object lesson. He says look at that coin and name the face that's on it! They answer: it's the emperor, of course. The King James Version is more specific. There they say it's Caesar! As in "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." We've heard this enigmatic expression so many times that it's probably lost its power and punch for us. Sadly, we usually also lose sight of the fact that in saying these words, Jesus is shifting the very terms of the debate. Can you see it? He brilliantly pivots their attention away from coins and taxes and things of the empire and pivots away from their questions about his religious observance. Instead he recenters and returns their attention to the things of God. In so doing, he begs new and deeper questions and provokes a deeper vision of reality. "Just what are the things of God?" and "How do we give to God what is God's?" He doesn't answer the question of whether it's right or wrong to pay taxes, not really. The far more important question for him, implied and left open for us all: What does it mean to give to God what is God's? And the coin may yet hold an essential clue!

For millennia, coins and paper money have born the images of rulers, kings, queens, emperors. This came home to me while visiting the Israel Museum in Jerusalem a few years back. Tucked away in a small, dark room on the lower level of the vast archaeology wing is a small exhibit of tiny artifacts. It

was their collection of ancient coins. It includes centuries of history as revealed by a succession of faces of power that are imprinted onto these bright and shiny tabs of precious metal - images and related propaganda that conveyed the promissory and illusory slogans of victory, security or peace. Walking along the black wall that encased the coins in small glasses boxes next to backlit descriptions, I thought what better a way to sell a political idol or ideology than to put them on the money itself. And then I came to it. A small gold coin found right there in Jerusalem, circa 30 CE, bearing the image of a Caesar. I immediately thought of our passage. Could it have been *the* coin from our story today? Probably not! But how cool is that its Jesus himself *might* have held it? Still standing there. I googled the text from Matthew and imagined Jesus saying to them: "Show me the coin! Whose face do you see? Go ahead and give it to him." Just so! And even there, staring at that coin, he was begging another question. If what we give to Caesar bears the image of Caesar, then what we give to God should bears God's image! That's the clue of the coin. His highlighting Caesar's image is intended to provoke our wondering of God's image!

The idea of God's image should be ringing a few bells for us. It conjures words from the first chapter of Genesis. "So, let us make humankind in our image." And yes, the pronoun is plural! To be made in the image of God - the Imago Dei - means that we are made to be a reflection of the very character of God. When we are living our lives to our full potential, when we are being our truest selves, we too can show forth and reflect the blessing of God's compassion and creativity, justice and mercy, freedom and joy. Though we don't often remember it and are by all means 'prone to wander' from it, we've all got that divine spark in us! We are made in the likeness of God. We are made to be like God, to bear God's character. Turns out the word "character" is etymologically rooted in an archaic expression meaning "imprint." Indeed, we are the bearers of God image, God's character and God's imprint! So, Jesus is here saying to us "Let what Caesar's imprint be given to Caesar. Let what bears God's imprint -- that is, you and me --be given to God.

Sounds good in theory, right? But here's the thing. Our daily lives already bear many competing imprints. Back in grad school, I used to watch re-runs of the sitcom Cheers. In one-episode, best pals Cliff and Norm are sitting on their usual barstools. They had just come to the realization that, in the midst of a drunken bender the night before, they each had gotten a tattoo on their butts. However, neither of them could remember what the tattoos were. With a sip of their beers, the one bravely turns to the other and says, "well . . . let's get this over with" and the two march off to the bathroom with heads hung low. Apparently, there was a mix up in the tattoo parlor, for having assessed the damage and now back on their barstools, Cliff, the ever-loyal mailman, turns to Norm and reluctantly tells him that his tattoo reads "I love the US Postal Service". In turn, Norm, the ever-loyal husband, tells Cliffie that his tattoo is a red heart emblazoned with the words "I love Vera." The scene concludes with Cliff quite seriously asking Norm if he would mind showing his fine specimen to his buddies back at the post office, you know, so he could at least get some credit for the idea. Whether in the form of a tattoo or some other visible symbol or not, many of us do bear the imprints of our careers and relationships, our titles, our educations, our candidates, our politics. Our very characters have been shaped by the roles we play in our professional and personal lives. If not our jobs, or our families, I wonder, what are the images and impressions you already bear?

A recent book by Ibram X. Kendi's includes a sober reminder of the ways that our white supremacy has been imprinted on all of us. Kendi quotes the searing words of Jefferson Davis, that the "inequality of the white and black races" was "stamped from the beginning." That's the book's title. Kendi writes that "Davis regarded Black people as biologically distinct and inferior to White people—and Black skin as an ugly stamp on the beautiful White canvas of normal human skin—and this Black stamp as a signifier of the Negro's everlasting inferiority." We've all been stamped by this brutal system, conditioned by it in ways that cut right to the core of our own self-images. How important is it for us all

to recover a sense of how we all have roots deeper than our whiteness or deeper than whatever race, we have roots deeper than whatever political party, deeper than our denominational affiliation! Indeed, according to scripture, we all bear first and foremost the image of God -- stamped, blessed and beloved from the very beginning as creatures made to hold and behold the very glory of God! Moses says it himself- God show me your presence! Alt translation! God show me your glory! Alt translation number 2 God show me your face! All because Moses knows full well by this point in his relationship with God that his purpose is to reflect that love and glory however he can, to give thanks and praise and glory and honor to the great Liberator who saw his people through!

Back to the question that I think Jesus was after: how do we give to God what is God? Like Moses, we let our own faces, our images and our lives shine forth God's glory! We let our whole lives and our very beings be a glowing reflection of God's loving character and glory. We don't need the mountaintop experiences of Moses to know what this means. Bearing the image of God is an act of awareness! It means our learning to see and return to the image of God that is already within us, within others, and within all creation. It's not about scratching our heads in theological ponderings. It is about seeing it and believing it, seeking it and finding it in our daily walks and relationships! When we can train our hearts to see God's glory and goodness shining, in every person, every creature, every moment, the rest will flow from us naturally. What from this awareness do we give to God? We can't help but give thanks, praise, honor, glory and blessing to God. It's one of the most hopeful and uplifting things we can do! And guess what? We don't have to wait for the election! We don't have to wait for another round of test results? Being aware of the divine image in us and around us, reflecting back its glory, is what we are made for each and every day. Just ask the Westminster Short Catechism. Some of you know it. What is the chief purpose of humankind? To give glory and praise to God, the One who is set on a throne higher than any earthly kingdom, higher than any nation, higher than any party or earthly ruler.

Still aren't sure? Why not try it out for yourself, not only when we sing it which we are about to do, but at other times in the coming day or week! Just repeat the phrase - Give God the glory! Seek and find the divine image and spark being born out in you, in others, in whatever moment, and let its reflection shine in you. Give God the glory! Decenter yourself and your concerns about your self-image! And give God the glory! Decenter your fear, your anxiety, your roles and titles and responsibilities! And give God the glory! Just try it. When you open your eyes first in the morning? Give God the glory! When you sip your coffee or tea? Give God the glory! When you see your cat or dog yawning adorably, go ahead and give God the glory for they are creatures that bear Gpd's image too! When your kid starts smiling or laughing or crying, give God the glory for the love you share! When you find yourself amidst a tense conversation about race or politics, give God the glory for giving you a voice in the beautiful struggle! When you encounter some random act of grace or kindness, give God the glory! I've been trying it myself lately. I'm telling you - you wouldn't believe how it can elevate your mood! I'm not saying this will change the election results or that we shouldn't be out there fighting. It won't change those unavoidable tragedies that are part and parcel of our human experience. But giving to God what is God's, remembering the very character of God imprinted on our souls, that strength, that love, that grace and resilience, may be what precisely what can see us and our people through these incredibly challenging times.

All Glory and honor and blessing and power be unto God! Let's lift it up even now and sing it together. Amen.