

October 16, 2011

Proper 24, Year A

Exodus 33:12-23

Psalm 99

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

Jesus' detractors are at it again in today's Gospel lesson. From earlier in Matthew (Mt. 12:14) we know it's the Pharisee's aim to destroy Jesus, and in today's reading they take a step in that direction as they try to discredit him. They pose to Jesus a question which they think will trap him for sure. "Tell us what you think, is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

If Jesus says "no," they could report him to the Roman officials as a seditious person and get him arrested. If Jesus says "yes," he incurs the wrath of the religious who take offence even at handling Roman coins. But Jesus says neither. He asks the Pharisees, "Who's head is on the coin?" When they reply, "The emperor's," Jesus basically says, "Well, then give it back to him." Give the emperor what belongs to him, and give to God what belongs to God.

The coin at issue here was Roman currency and bore Caesar's likeness and inscription. When a king came to power, he stuck his own coinage. This showed the reality of his kingship, and that coinage was held to be the property of the king who's image it bore. The Pharisee's couldn't argue with Jesus answer, the coin did belong to the emperor, and Jesus had side-stepped their question about the obligation to pay taxes.

Not only that, Jesus gave them a verbal slap up-side the head, reminding these religious leaders of their basic obligation to God. The Pharisees knew the Scripture account of creation, the Genesis account of humanity made in the divine image. They couldn't challenge Jesus' words. If an earthly emperor claims a coin that bears his image, so much more does the God of all creation claim whatever bears God's image.

I'd ask us to think about this, this morning. Since we are made in the image of God and belong to him, and if we then are to offer ourselves back to God, what might that mean? How does that work? Since our Gospel lesson revolves around an image on a coin, I thought maybe we could imagine a coin to help us look at this.

When I was a boy I was into coins. I had a little coin collection. For some reason I still remember one particular coin, an 1856 Columbian Exposition half-dollar. It was a commemorative coin, minted to recognize the exposition held in Chicago that year. I even have some wooden nickels, made to celebrate the centennial of my home town, Rolfe, Iowa, in 1963. Coins can help us remember.

What if somehow God would give each of us a personal coin to carry around in our pocket to help us remember to “give back to God what is God’s”? What might this coin look like? I’ll take a guess it might look something like this: On one side of the coin would be a cross.

In the cross we see the ultimate expression of God’s love for you and me. We remember Jesus dying on the cross for our sins, so that we can live in forgiveness and new life. It is in the cross that you and I find hope, strength for a new day, and the assurance that God is always with us, in all circumstances of life.

It is in the cross that we are called to serve God and each other. This includes giving what God has entrusted to us: material possessions, money, our time, our gifts and talents – all we have, to live generously in response to God’s call to you and me.

Under the shadow of the cross we live together as a community of faith. The cross can unite us as a church. By sharing the love of God as shown in the cross, you and I can help bring healing and wholeness to the broken world we live in. If ever healing and peace, were needed, it is today.

Through the cross and in the risen Lord we are invited to live our lives from cradle to grave, and all along the way we give ourselves back to God. In baptism we recognize that we belong to God and are dedicated to him. When we are confirmed we promise again to live our lives in the reality that we belong to God. As we present ourselves at the Eucharist every week we again and again offer ourselves to God. And so on through life, until our earthly life comes to an end and in the grace of God, through the cross, we return in wholeness to our Lord.

So, on one side of our coin is the cross, but what about the other side? I’ll take another guess, and say that on the other side of the coin is a face. Not just any face, but your face, my face; each of our faces on our coin. Our face reminds us that we are individually, personally loved by God. Most of us know by heart John 3:16. “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*” But, this verse cries out to be personalized. “For God so loved (insert person’s name), that he gave his only son

And we’re loved just as we are; not the person we might wish we were, or some sanitized version of ourselves. God loves us with our joys, our hopes, our dreams, and also our struggles, our pain, our losses, our grief, our difficulty forgiving someone, our addictions, our prejudices – just as we are.

Maybe it is especially these areas of our life where we need healing, or fall short that God most invites us to give to him. That seemed to be Jesus’ pattern in the Gospels. He paid little attention to those who “had it all together”, but spent most of his time reaching out to those who knew they needed help, those who were struggling; the down and out, persons who had little hope, the outcast.

Not much has changed over the centuries. Today, the “I don’t need help, I can manage quite well on my own, thank you very much” philosophy is held dear. But the truth is, we’re not created to manage on our own; we are spiritual human beings wired to have a relationship with the one in whose image we are made. It is in giving ourselves, all we are, back to God that each of us can experience the kind of life offered in Christ.

Years ago we had an interim priest here for a while, Fr. Wilfred Files. He was a wonderful man, retired priest who had served in Alaska. He used to take dogsleds and airplanes to reach his far-flung congregations. He was a grandfatherly type fellow, who, it seemed to me, had accumulated a lot of wisdom along the way. After all these years, I still remember something he said during one of his homilies: “*It doesn’t take much of a man to be a Christian – just all of him.*” That pretty much says it for each of us. It doesn’t take much of a person to be a Christian – just all of her, or him.

Today and everyday may you and I remember, “Give to God the things that are God.” May you and I let Jesus have us 100%, just as we are, the whole package, to bless, heal, forgive and love.

Amen.