

Proper 24, Year A

October 19, 2014

*Some of what I share with you today comes from Methodist Pastor, Professor, and author Leonard Sweet.**

In our Gospel lesson today, two different groups of Jews, Herodians and Pharisees – normally adversaries – band together for the common purpose of trying to trap Jesus. Their question to him: “Does the Jewish religious law allow us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” It seems an impossible question to answer without falling into deep trouble with one group or another. If Jesus says that it IS lawful to pay tax to Caesar, he will seem to be siding with the hated Roman occupiers who are subjugating the Jews and promulgating Emperor worship. If he says it is NOT lawful, he will be setting himself up as a political rebel, liable for arrest by Rome.

What Jesus does instead – as he so often does! – is reframe the whole question. He first asks for a Roman coin. Now this incident occurs on Temple grounds, and the Jewish Law did not allow use of Roman coinage in the Temple, since the Roman coin had stamped on it the Commandment-forbidden graven image of the Emperor, with these words: “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus” – claiming Caesar Augustus as a god. Jesus himself doesn’t have one of these pagan coins on his person, but his accusers seem to have one handy. Jesus asks: “Whose image is this?” They respond: “The emperor’s.” And Jesus concludes: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” I think it’s important to note that Jesus *could* have answered his adversaries’ question, “Does the Jewish Law allow us to pay tax to Caesar?”, simply with the *first* half of his sentence: “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s.” That would have sufficed to address the issue. But Jesus doesn’t stop there; he adds something which in effect turns the whole incident into a powerful spiritual teaching: “...**and** render unto God what is God’s.” The *coin* bore the image of the emperor; but what bears **God’s** image? You do; I do. We know from the very first chapters of the Bible that human beings were created in the image of God. Jesus says that we are to give unto God what is God’s, namely, our authentic, human lives.

I can imagine a MasterCard advertisement based on this Scripture passage. Jesus says, “Giving to Caesar what is Caesar’s: \$100. Giving to God what is God’s: Priceless.” For that is really the gist of this teaching: that there is no *comparison* between rendering to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s. And yet how often do you and I keep these two images – graven image and divine image – in their proper order? We can so easily get all caught up in whatever externalities consume our energies, while ignoring the far more important matter of living fully human lives which reflect the image of God in which we were created. And what is truly frightening is the fact that most of the time we don’t even *recognize* that our priorities and self-identities have gotten so skewed.

Some of you may remember the work of Stanley Milgram, who in the early 1960’s conducted the now famous behavioral experiment that sought to make some kind of sense out of the horror of the Holocaust. How, Milgram wanted to know, could ordinary Christian people, like the German citizens of Nazi Germany, condone and participate in such horrific behavior as was found in the concentration camps?

To find out, Milgram enlisted ordinary people to sit in his laboratory and gave them strict orders to administer electric shocks to other persons in a separate room if they answered questions incorrectly. Milgram's research found that when an authority figure was giving the order, people somehow felt absolved of personal responsibility and followed the directives they were given — even when those directives involved electrocuting another human being. Milgram found that an amazingly high percentage of participants would “flip the switch” to the “danger — severe shock” level if an appropriately authoritative figure so ordered.

Over fifty years later, Milgram's experiment was re-enacted at Cambridge University, but with a distinctively Twenty-First Century difference. Instead of the power of an authoritative official determining the participant's willingness to “zap” another human being, this time the only impetus to pull the trigger was . . . money.

The experimenter instructed subjects: “Either administer a painful electric shock to a person in another room and make one British pound (about \$1.50), or spare the person the shock and forgo the money.” Although initially 64% of the participants claimed they would never electrocute another person, as the ante went up their resolve went down. As the money reward for administering a shock went up, so did the number of people who suddenly found that shocking wasn't that shocking.

At the conclusions of the study only **4%** of the participants — you heard that right, only **4%** of the participants — stuck to their guns and refused to intentionally inflict pain upon another human being for cash. The magic monetary amount that changed peoples morals? 30 dollars.

The predatory power of thirty pieces of silver, the cost of Jesus' betrayal, the betrayal of our fellow human beings. It makes something less-than-human out of almost all of us.

Now, I would venture to guess that most of us here would **like** to believe that we would be in the 4% who were true to our faith and would never harm another human being for money or because some authority figure told us to. But I have to confess, my friends, that in my own life I have harmed others countless times for the sake of my own gain — perhaps not monetary gain, but ego gain, to prove I was right, to make myself look good, or to retaliate against someone who has hurt me — none of which is justification for hurting someone else, any more than hurting someone for money is justifiable. The difference is that we are so often **unconscious** of the fact that we are hurting someone else to benefit the imperial ego which sits like Caesar on the hidden throne of our lives. In our Gospel reading, we are told that Jesus was “aware of their malice.” But I doubt that his adversaries were. So often we are not: we are not aware of our tendencies to act in less-than-fully-human ways toward one another; our tendencies to hurt others in order to shore up our own insecure or power-hungry egos.

In our Gospel, Jesus in effect holds up a mirror in front of the Herodians and Pharisees and asks, “Whose image do you see?” And if we take this Gospel to heart, we will find that Jesus is doing the same for us: holding up a mirror in front of our face and asking us, “Whose image do you see?”

The image we see in that mirror depends on who or what it is that is sitting on the throne of our lives. Perhaps it is some external thing or things we have poured out our energies to attain. Perhaps it is our own imperial ego. Perhaps we have lived so long without recognizing the image of God in us that we have forgotten what that image looks like; we've forgotten who we **are** in God, that we were created in God's own image. At such times, it is perhaps helpful to put down the mirror entirely, pick up the Gospels, and read once again the life of Jesus. For when we forget what it means to be truly human, what it means to be created in the image of God, we need to gaze again at the Son of Man, the Human One. For his face is the true face of humanity, and to live in him is to be who we truly are: the image of God.

AMEN

*Leonard Sweet, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2011, 0-000-1415