

Proper 24A 2017 Sermon

October 22, 2017

Genesis 1:26 (NRSV)

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

*'The Lord said to my Lord,
"Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet"'*?

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

In our Gospel lesson today, two different groups of Jews, Herodians and Pharisees (who were normally adversaries) band together for the common purpose of trying to trap Jesus. Their question to him is this: "Does the Jewish religious law allow us to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" It seems an impossible question for Jesus to answer without falling into deep trouble with one group or another. If Jesus says that it IS lawful to pay taxes 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.

But Jesus does not answer the trick question they ask; instead, as he so often does, he reframes the whole question. He first asks for a Roman coin – the kind that would be used to pay taxes to Caesar. The coin had stamped on it the Commandment-forbidden graven image of the Emperor, with this title: "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus" – claiming that Caesar was a god! The coin

itself thus violated two of the 10 Commandments: thou shalt not make any graven image, and thou shalt have no other god before me. Jesus takes the coin they offer him, holds it up, and then 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...”

Now, he could have stopped there, for that answered the question about whether one should pay taxes to the emperor. But Jesus *doesn't* stop there; he *adds* something which in effect turns the whole incident into a powerful spiritual teaching: “...**and** give unto God what is God’s.” The *coin* bore the image of the emperor, so **it** should be given to the emperor; but what bears **God’s** image? You do; I do. For we know from our Old Testament reading today that we human beings were created in the image and likeness of God. Jesus is saying that we are to give unto God what is God’s, namely, our own authentic, true selves, which are created in God’s image and likeness. God’s image and likeness are in our very DNA, our genes!

And yet all too often those genes remain dormant, unexpressed. For we can so easily get all caught up in our self-constructed **ego** identities, those images of ourselves that we hold in our minds and project to the world, while we ignore the whole matter of living from that **core** of ourselves which is our *True Self*, that self which is created in God’s image and likeness. And we aren’t even conscious that we are living out of this “constructed image” a great majority of the time: living our lives as if our truest identity is to be found in our ego selves, the personas we have created, the images we hold of ourselves and project outward to the world. We so often live our lives as if they belong to us and to this world, this society, this culture, and not to God.

And I’m afraid that, despite our baptismal vow to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself,” we don’t often treat **others** as having been created in God’s image and likeness, either. All too often, if you’re like me, we treat others as tools to use to get what we want. This past week it came to light that the powerful Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein has – for over 30 years – used women and young men as objects for his own gratification. And, as Director Quentin Tarantino has confessed, people like Tarantino himself *knew* this was going on and yet said nothing about this objectification, dehumanization, and abuse of human beings who were created in God’s divine image and likeness. And Harvey Weinstein is certainly not the only one who has treated people as less than who they truly are in God. We *all* do it, far more often than we’d like to admit; or at least, like Tarantino, we are complicit by our silence.

So here’s a question: Where do we get the images we hold of ourselves and others?

Clearly, our parents had a hand in molding our self-image and teaching us how to view others. If we were fortunate enough to have loving, spiritually mature

parents, then we are probably more apt to see ourselves as inherently lovable, capable, and having worth, and to see others in a similar light. But more and more, the images we hold of ourselves and others are shaped by television and internet ads, social media, texts and tweets and Instagrams and narrowly-targeted partisan news which seem only to polarize, isolate, and affirm an us-vs.-them, ego-aggrandizing identity which is totally opposite to our identity in God, opposite to the mind of Christ. And as fewer and fewer people in our nation associate with *any* religion at all, there will be fewer and fewer spiritual and moral restraints on this self-centered, me-first, my-group-first, vulgar, “I’m right-you’re-wrong” identity which is so increasingly prevalent in our world. I daresay it has become the dominant perspective of the human person in our nation today.

My friends, we **have** to know that *this* is the image of the **emperor**, *not* the image of God.

Episcopal monk David Vryhof notes that Mahatma Gandhi once said, “‘We become what we yearn after; hence the necessity for prayer.’[1] We become what we yearn after; hence the necessity for prayer. [In saying] ‘We become what we yearn after...’ Gandhi does not mean that... if we yearn after wealth, we will [necessarily] become wealthy; or if we yearn after popularity, we will become popular... [He means] that ... what we set our hearts on, what we most deeply desire, will influence the type of person we will become. Our desires shape our choices, and our choices shape our character. If we yearn after wealth or popularity or beauty or any other *thing*, that yearning will shape the choices that we make [and our image of ourselves – who we see ourselves to be. And, my friends, all around us are voices and advertisements telling us what we should yearn after, telling us what image is to be desired].

“‘We become what we yearn after; hence the necessity for prayer.’ Prayer gives us space and opportunity to look deep within ourselves, to discover and name our **deepest** [God-implanted] desires,”¹ which emanate from our **true** identity, which is the image of God. And what does the image of God in us look like? Each of us is unique, of course, so that no *two* images are **exactly** alike. But we Christians believe that Jesus is, in the words of St. Paul, “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15); so if we want to see our true identity, the image of God in which we each were created, we can start by looking at Jesus, “the image of the invisible God.” Several years ago, there were silicone wristbands that were very popular in some Christian circles. They bore the letters “W.W.J.D.?” “What would Jesus do?” It was helpful, in so far as it went; it just didn’t go far enough. For it is not just that we should imitate what Jesus *did*; we should recognize in our selves Christ’s own image, “the image of the invisible God” in whose likeness we were created. As C.S. Lewis said, we are to be “little Christs;” there is nothing else. So we should not only ask, “What would Jesus *do*?”, but also, “What was Jesus like? Whom would he show compassion for? What was his deepest desire? Whom would he identify with? Whom would Jesus forgive? Whom would Jesus love? Whom would Jesus want to heal and reconcile to God and community?”

And as we ask ourselves these questions in prayer, in the silence of our heart, we will discover that the image of God, the heart of God, the mind of God, lies within *each* of us, deeply implanted in our very DNA. It needs only to be uncovered, revealed, expressed, recognized as our **True** Self – who we *really* are: the image of God in which you and I were created. Indeed, every person on the face of this earth was created in the image and likeness of God – as the very first chapter of the Bible clearly tells us.

And if Gandhi was right and we become what we yearn after, let us **pray** for the desire, the yearning to become our *True* selves, that image of God in which each of us was created. “Behold who you are; become what you receive.” If each one of us lived our lives out of *that* identity, would not our world be a far better place? Would not God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven?

AMEN

¹ “Choices” Posted on March 14, 2010 by Br. David Vryhof <https://www.ssje.org/2010/03/14/choices-br-david-vryhof/>