

Made in God's Image

By: Meagan McLaughlin

October 18, 2020. In today's gospel reading about paying taxes to the emperor, the religious leaders are trying to draw Jesus into a trap, and he knows it. But if Caesar's image on the coins belongs to Caesar, then God's image belongs to God. And we, who have been made in God's image, belong to God.

Readings: [Isaiah 45:1-7](#), [Psalm 96:1-13](#), [1 Thessalonians 1:1-10](#), [Matthew 22:15-22](#)

*** Transcript ***

There is no right or easy answer to the question that the religious leaders ask Jesus today. And that's intentional — the religious leaders are trying to draw Jesus into a trap, and he knows it. Jesus knows he is being flattered, he knows they are trying to catch him off his guard. And if he says yes, of course pay your taxes to the occupying tyrant, he will alienate those who trust him to help them find a way out from under, as well as violating temple law. If he says no, you don't owe anything to the king, the leaders have grounds to have him arrested by the Romans — which of course they did anyway, eventually. He never tried to hide his alliance with those on the margins, after all. Jesus is caught between a rock and a hard place, isn't he?

And his answer is really nothing short of brilliant. By making them produce the coin, he is compelling them to demonstrate their alliance with the empire, with Rome, something they didn't necessarily want to do. Instead of successfully forcing Jesus to choose a side, the leaders revealed to everyone watching that they already had picked a side! The lives they lived and the privilege they had was made possible by the same empire that made the lives of so many others miserable and oppressed. The denarius in their pocket, bearing the image of the emperor, was proof of it.

But before we get too comfortable with ourselves here, it occurred to me that if I am honest with myself, I can't judge the leaders with that denarius in their pocket without acknowledging the denarius that I hold in my own pocket. It's kind of like Jesus telling his listeners in another conversation that they should not try to remove the speck from their siblings' eye before removing the plank from their own eye. There are many ways in which I have benefited from systems in this world that do great damage to others — banking with institutions that support payday lending, buying clothes made using unjust labor practices, getting food that is not sustainably produced and does damage to the earth and to other communities, and many others things. And although we've made changes to live more justly, sometimes it seems like there is no way to escape some of these alliances that I have — that we all have if we're honest — with the empire of our day. I know that I, like the leaders who are trying to challenge Jesus, are carrying that denarius in my pocket, too.

Once the coin has been produced, Jesus makes clear this connection, claiming that because of the image on the coin, it belongs to the emperor. And that got me thinking about images and belonging — and this is where we get to the good news! Especially today, as we celebrate in this community Sloane's baptism that happened yesterday. Because although the denarius has the image of the emperor, we have been made in the image of God! We go back to Genesis and the story of creation, and we know that God made us in God's image. And if Caesar's image like those on the coins belongs to Caesar, as Jesus suggests, then God's image belongs to God. We, who have been made in God's image, belong to God!

Throughout sacred scripture, we're told over and over that we belong to God. The psalmist sings in

Psalm 96 of the god who made all things, and describes all of creation singing out of joy, not because God commanded it, but because it can't help itself. The heavens are glad, the earth rejoices, the seas roar, and the fields exult! Paul tells the Thessalonians that he has seen them embody the spirit and promise of God so well, that they don't even need to say it, everyone just knows whose they are.

We too can embody God's promise in our world. We can make choices, one decision at a time, that reflect God's love and abundance and justice, and challenge injustice, violence, and the myth of scarcity. We can practice opening our hearts and our lives to those who are wounded and left out by today's empire, embodying welcome like Paul says the Thessalonians did.

Being the image of God is not something we do only here, within these virtual walls of Christ Lutheran Church, but in our neighborhoods, our families, our workplaces, and our schools. The image of God that we are can be reflected in all areas of our lives, in particular these next few weeks in our civic life. First, we vote, and we encourage others to do so also. And second, we bring our faith to the polls, claiming God's promise and desire for the well-being of all people and all creation.

And every time we celebrate a baptism, we remember this promise. Like the Thessalonians, more and more we grow in our capacity to reflect the image of the one who formed us out of clay and breathed life into us. We're reminded that even those we might think don't belong — like Cyrus, that Persian king who Isaiah calls God's anointed — they are all God's children. We remember that we too were formed with great creative joy, and are made in the image of the one who continues to create us all anew today.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's. Today we recall our baptisms, as we celebrate in this community Sloane's baptism. We claim in the baptismal water and words the promise that we are made in God's image, and belong to the God whose image we bear. So today, we give ourselves to God, and ask God to keep forming and shaping and teaching us throughout our lives, and we go out from here to embody God's love and justice in the world — not because we are commanded to do so, but simply because we are God's, and we just can't help it.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

2020, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, YouTube, video, Pastor Meagan McLaughlin, Isaiah 45:1-7, Psalm 96:1-13, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, Matthew 22:15-22