

SERMON 20.10.18

Psalm 24:1 The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it; the world, and those who live in it."

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

SERMON:

Lately, I've felt a lot like a Pharisee. Just like the guys in our reading today, I can get so anxious that I look for ways to argue my point and trap others whose beliefs scare and threaten me. When I'm stressed, it's more challenging to be amazed, as we're told was the response of the religious leaders as they left this encounter with Jesus.

To be amazed - it's to open ourselves up - to be open hearted, curious, willing to see in a new light.

Those Pharisees in our story must have been feeling really anxious. You see the Pharisees opposed the Roman empire, but here, we see them teaming up with their rivals, the Herodians, who actively worked with Rome, to double down on Jesus, this person spouting revolutionary ideas about God's kingdom. The pharisees and the herodians - they were ideologically and politically opposed to each other. Enemies, really, who were joining forces against this man, Jesus.

Religious leaders in Matthew's gospel have a long history of testing Jesus in the hope of getting him to say something incriminating (16:1; 19:3). And this time is no different. We're here, in the midst of Holy Week, the shadow of the cross growing. At this point in the story, the religious leaders weren't curious, coming with an open mind to learn from Jesus. No, They are fearful; fearful that his teachings will bring down their sacred traditions - will upend the Jewish way of life as they know it. There's something familiar here, isn't there?

Jesus recognizes their close hearted attitude; their evil intent AND he stays engaged.

When we feel threatened by opposing sides, do we do the same? Jesus doesn't walk away, he takes their question seriously, and his answer is masterful, complex and relevant for us today.

"Tell us, the leaders say, Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Let's take a moment and look at the historical context of taxes. Really, there's no comparison to today's taxes. No matter how you feel about taxes, today there's at least some common good that comes from them - roads, schools, other necessary parts of our shared life. Taxes in gospel times were imposed by The Romans, a foreign occupier, who charged taxes to cement the oppression -keeping their occupation and domination of the land and people intact. Taxes were very much hated by the Jewish people.

So again, this question is a total set up. Agree to pay taxes, Jesus, and you alienate your people. Say no, and the leaders have what they want - evidence of defiance of Rome.

In response, Jesus asks for a coin.

Whose image is on it?

The emperors.

Well then, Jesus says, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'

Whose image is this? Give to the Romans what has Rome stamped on it, pay your taxes.

AND, and, give to God all things that have the image of God upon it.

Who, what, has God's image on them? Who is stamped with the image of God?

"The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it; the world, and those who live in it."
Every person - every sinner, every leper, every one who has ever been marginalized, kicked down, thrown out by the religious establishment. Every body is stamped with the image of God.

This story is not about the money, it's about the way we spend our lives.

But the “coinage”, the currency of God’s kingdom is of a radically different nature than that of Rome. God does not trade in the emperor’s currency -coins and material goods¹, God is interested in our lives.

So what is the coinage of God’s kingdom? How do we spend our lives? Jesus teaches that loving God, caring for the lonely, those living on the margins, praying for our enemies- that’s the coinage, that’s the currency of God’s kingdom here on earth.

It’s recognizing that every person is stamped with the image of God, belongs to God, is beloved of God.

And that includes you. You are stamped with the image of God.

Living into the reality that we, that I, that you, are stamped with the image of God, that allows us to open up, maybe to let go of some of the anxiety that we need to control all aspects of life. And when we open up, we can be amazed.

Our passage ends with “When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.” They were amazed. Amazed, sometimes translated marveled, or astonished.

These religious leaders who came looking to trap left astonished, amazed, marveling at Jesus’ teachings. We know that in a matter of days, these same leaders were calling for Jesus’ crucifixion.

But here, in this moment, they, and the others listening too, were amazed. They were filled with wonder and surprise.

Amazement and wonder lead to curiosity, all of which open our hearts to the possibility of something new. Jesus’ disciples, those who got it both so wrong at times, and yet got it right enough that they continued to be amazed and open to experience the risen Christ.

Somehow Jesus’ listeners were amazed. We, too, can be amazed, and amazement is good for us, body, mind and soul. Psychologist Rick Hanson says that amazement is instant stress relief.²

¹ Raj Nadella.

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4624

²Hanson, Rick. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/your-wise-brain/201506/be-amazed>

Amazement requires that we be willing to see, hear, experience something in a slightly different way. Jesus catches the religious leaders of his time off guard. He responds in a way they never imagined.

If every one is stamped with God's image, then Everything belongs to God - election cycles, political appointments, acts of kindness. Every thing belongs to God. It's not all in our hands.

According to Matthew's gospel, just a few days after this exchange we see the ultimate expression of imperial might as Jesus is crucified for blasphemy and sedition. But that isn't the end of the story. The emperor may seem to rule the world, but Easter promises that God, not the emperor, gets the last word.

God has the last word. Never forget, my friends, God is in control of this messy, anxious, seemingly out of control world of ours.

We are called to live as one stamped with the image of God. Live this reality, and give the rest to God. That's amazing.

What amazes you these days my friends? How do you give and receive the coinage of Christ's unending love?

I leave you with those questions to consider, and I want to share a part of a video that I watched this week about amazement. It's really stuck with me - and brought some joy in the way one person experienced the world with another. I invite you to sit back and enjoy the wonder with me.³ That will be followed by meditative music offered by Becky.

³ From Sy Montgomery talk, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2yDf7_1oc&feature=emb_rel_end