

Sermon Proper 24A
October 16, 2011
Exodus 33:12-23
Psalm 99
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22
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One of my favorite camp songs has this refrain. “We are made in the image of God. Make way for the image of God.” This song was an important part of the reflections offered at summer camp for middle and high school students in the Diocese of Kentucky. The first reflection introduced the week of camp with the theme “Created in the Image of God.” Bishop Gulick led that first reflection on our first night together. Each camper held a small mirror and looked closely at their face. With each reflection, the bishop asked the campers to focus on one element of their face beginning with their eyes and then their ears, then nose, and finally their mouths. After each reflection we would sing the refrain from the song. Sing here perhaps.

This exercise was not an easy one for adolescents. Too frequently when they look in the mirror they see imperfections. But the point of the exercise was to see each part of our faces in a new light, as offering unique sensory experiences and benefits. The parts of our face all combine to make us who we are, the unique person God has created. The unique person who is beautiful in the eyes of God. And most importantly the unique person that bears the divine image. This facial reflection was the first activity that launched the week of camp that allowed students to explore their physical and emotional development from a spiritual perspective. It was my favorite week to be a part of the summer camp staff. I loved watching the students engaged and excited to be growing in faith. To experience them coming to see themselves as uniquely gifted by God, as they developed a positive self-image. The importance of a healthy self-image became apparent as I reflected upon the lessons for this Sunday.

Image was a topic of the gospel lesson. Jesus was approaching the end of his earthly ministry and his adversaries were determined to entrap him. They had come up with a plan they were sure would work. Some of the Pharisees have enlisted some Herodians to set a trap during an encounter with Jesus in the Temple. It is an unlikely alliance; Pharisees, strict observers of the law, teaming up with supporters of the Roman authorities, known as Herodians.

The question was one of taxation and allegiance. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” The trap was set or so they thought. If Jesus said it was not lawful to pay taxes, then he could be charged with sedition. That is why the Herodians were present. On the other hand, if he claims Torah allows paying taxes knowing the revenue will be used to maintain pagan temples, his teaching will be denounced. Either way they thought they had him. But Jesus recognized their intent from the beginning. The temple had special coinage

used to pay the tax. Coinage without Roman images on it. Faithful Jews would not even have brought Roman coinage into the temple. In fact local coins were minted that had no animal or human image for the specific purpose of fulfilling religious obligations. Jesus though immediately takes the upper hand. “Show me a coin used to pay the tax.”

A denarius was produced. The denarius of Jesus’ day had an inscription which read, “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest.” The coin is already Caesar’s, and thus can be returned, as a fact of political life, but this is not an abandonment of the rule of God.

“Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s (and to God the things that are God’s.)

By drawing attention to the image on the coin, Jesus made the answer seem easy. Why of course give a coin suggesting the emperor’s divinity back to the emperor. That seems easy enough. So it is ok to pay taxes. Paul says as much as well in his letter to the Romans. But then the brilliance of Jesus’ reply becomes apparent. Give to God the things that are God’s?

The faithful know well the creation narrative from the book of Genesis. The story hinges on the question of image and specifically the image that humanity bears. His listeners would know the reference to Genesis (1:26) and the significance of the passage.

So it is ok to render taxes to Caesar or in our case government. But what do we return to God? Coming during this time of stewardship we might easily think of tithing or of pledging our time, talent, and treasure to the church. But this is more than a stewardship passage. This is about something much bigger. Being created in the image of God is a perpetual reminder that God has a claim on every aspect of our lives.

Each and every aspect of our day. The passage encourages us to see ourselves in a new light, the light of God’s love. The very love that our image reflects to the world around us.

In his book, *After You Believe*, N.T. Wright reflects upon what it means to bear the divine image and he understands this to place a responsibility upon us. To be a bearer of the divine image means that we are actually signposts of God’s love and presence in the world. “Statutes of God’s sovereignty.” That is the phrase that Wright uses. “Statutes of God’s sovereignty.” Suddenly, our responsibility is much greater. As disciples of Jesus we are to be cognizant of the fact that we bear God’s image throughout our day, all day, every day.

Discipleship is not limited to Sunday worship, prayers before meals, or at bedtime. Discipleship isn’t even limited to tithing or financial stewardship. It’s much bigger. God has a claim on every aspect of our lives.

When we are in school or engaged in after school activities. When we are carpooling children between activities. Or when we are shopping for groceries, going to school, meeting with a client or customer, caring for a family member, etc. Each and every activity is an opportunity to open ourselves to what God may be calling forth. At each and every moment we are to be open to God’s hopes for us. Because we never know what opportunities are just around the bend, opportunities to proclaim God’s love in our actions.

Over the course of our lives we come to know what this may entail as we grow into the disciples that Jesus is calling us to be. We are never fully formed but always growing, always learning what may be called for in each and every moment of our lives. Because each and every moment is precious.

I learned that most clearly from a dear friend who died two weeks ago, an Episcopal priest whose name was Carolyn West. When I first met Carolyn she was an active lay person and editor of the daily newspaper in Newport News, The Daily Press. But she gave up her work as editor to follow her call to ordained ministry in the early 1990's. During her three years of seminary study, Carolyn spent one summer studying in Africa. When she returned she said that when I went to seminary I too needed to go to Africa. Now this was amazing to me at the time because at that point I was not clear that I would be going to seminary. But her trip to Africa changed Carolyn. Much of that change came about from one experience.

After her initial studies she spent several weeks visiting with women in East Africa. She got to know one woman in particular during her stay with her. This woman was of very limited means, living in a one room hut with a dirt floor without water, plumbing, or electricity. But her home was tasteful and the woman was extravagant in her welcome and care for Carolyn. At one point Carolyn made note of a beautiful yet simple basket in the woman's home. "What a lovely basket you have," Carolyn remarked.

Her host replied, "Then I must give it to you." Carolyn replied that she couldn't take it, since it was the only basket the woman owned. "But you must," she insisted. They went back and forth until the woman at last said, "you must have it Carolyn and then every time I miss it, I shall think of you." The woman insisted and the basket became a focal point of Carolyn's exquisitely tasteful home. Each time she saw the basket it reminded Carolyn of a woman who had very little, but who as St. Paul said, "Possessed everything." The woman knew what it meant to be created in the image of God. This woman knew that everything she had was a gift. And she knew what it meant to dedicate her life to God, to be open to God's call in her life. She did not have much and yet she truly possessed the most important knowledge of all.

That visit with such a faithful woman in Africa changed Carolyn forever. After that trip, she was never the same. The light of Christ shined forth from Carolyn at all times. She lived the offertory sentence, "let your light so shine before all people that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." Carolyn was a statue of God's sovereignty. She was a dedicated priest and her life was an inspiration to many, including me.

So, never forget how important your life is either. Life is short and we will only pass this way once. You were created by God and are loved by God.

You are a statue of God's creation. You are to be a beacon of God's love in a world in desperate need. You are nothing less than a statue of God's sovereignty.

"We are made in the image of God, make way for the image of God."