

Year A, Pentecost 18, Proper 23

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Based on Matthew 22:15-22 and 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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Whose Image Drives Us?

Events have been tumbling over themselves these last few weeks as we have followed Jesus into the capital city. Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey and goes straight to the temple. At the temple, in an act of political theater, he disrupts the place and we think this was his way of saying the era of the temple is over, with its blood sacrifices and purity codes, and he himself will be the new temple—the new way to achieve peace and connection to God. The temple authorities are not happy with what he has done and they want to know by what authority he acted and who gave him that authority. In response he tells them three parables. After hearing these stories they decide they must get rid of Jesus.

We begin, “Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.” Being afraid of the crowd they can’t just arrest him in broad daylight and besides, they are smart, political people. If they can trap him within the jaws of their own tense political realities he will make a mistake and will cause others to get rid of him for them.

They send their cleverest thinkers and they carefully structure their opening statement. “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?” The trap is laced with flowers and flattery but Jesus sees it. “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?”

He shows them he knows what they are up to and then accepts their challenge to say something that does not tumble him into their trap. “Show me the coin used for the tax.” he commands. To pay this particular tax to Rome they couldn’t use just any coin. It had to be a special coin issued by the government. Interestingly, Jesus doesn’t have one, and so they bring one to him. “Whose image is this and whose title,” He asks? They

answer, “The emperor’s.” Then, Jesus says, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Jesus has his questioners get out some money and says: “Caesar made this; give it back to Caesar. But God made you; give yourself back to God.” **This is a great focus for this stewardship season. We don’t just give our money, we give all of ourselves.**

In doing this, he also avoids saying anything that will get him into trouble with either the Roman occupation force or the Jewish nationalists and instead redirects everyone to a higher question. They are amazed and go away.

For the remainder of our time today I want to explore this higher question and the passage from 1 Thessalonians will be helpful. Here is the deeper question. **Whose image drives us? Who are we imitating really in the living our lives?** When Jesus said, “give to the emperor what is the emperor’s” he knew that all of us are made in the image of God. **If we give to God what is God’s, we give all of ourselves. Really then, there is nothing left for Caesar!** Caesar makes claims on our money and we must comply, but Caesar cannot have our hearts. **Our hearts have already been given to another.** The first commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and we are moving in that direction. In fact, loving God becomes easier with each passing day as we come to know the character of God revealed in Jesus. If it weren’t for Jesus we might think God is mean and vindictive, power hungry and abusive, capricious and demanding—a lot like Caesar but supersized! **But God is not. God is like Jesus.** Jesus can say “give to the emperor what is the emperor’s” with confidence because he knows that Jews and Gentiles **all, belong to God at a deeper level than the paying of taxes can ever touch.** We are God’s children and made in his image.

This is the reality Paul is lifting up in his opening words to the people of Thessalonica. “For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you.” **We have already been chosen and are not available to Caesar. We have given our hearts to another when we received the message of the gospel--and “not just in words but with power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”** Dear people, this is happening to us and to me, your pastor. We are in the process of getting it.

And then Paul goes on, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example.” Are we persecuted for believing in the gospel? I think so. Not necessarily in a physical way like early Christians, at least at this point, but certainly in other ways. There is a growing cultural disdain for openly embracing Jesus as Lord. We will explore this more on another Sunday.

I was also struck by the phrase, “imitators of us and of the Lord.” I believe all of us are imitators and we really can’t help it. It is what we humans do. We imitate others and wouldn’t be human if we didn’t.

In 1992 Scientists in Parma, Italy stumbled on an important discovery. They noticed that when a monkey saw a human grab a peanut, the monkey’s brain fired as though it were grabbing the peanut. There was no difference whether the monkey did it or someone it watched did. As far as the brain was concerned, “monkey see and monkey do” even when the monkey did nothing! They labeled the special cells that did this, “mirror neurons” and later discovered that human’s have way more of these than any other creature. This explains why I cannot remain motionless when watching sports. In my mind I am doing what I see the athlete on the screen doing and of course with the same precision and grace. This is also why I find it fascinating to watch my grandchildren watch a TV show though I cannot see the screen myself. I see what is happening mirrored in their bodies and facial expressions. Most scientists now think these mirror neurons make it possible for us to learn and feel with other humans. If that is true, then they are very important for the transmission of culture. **Who we watch becomes critically important, for it determines who we become.** *There is an icon that shows St. Peter pointing to Jesus, and Jesus pointing upward to God.* If we imitate Jesus we will move in a different direction than if we imitate Caesar. But we will imitate. Humans are elaborate and wonderful copy machines.

We like to think we are the original and hate it when we are accused of copying. Remember the shame of being called a copy-cat by our eleven year old peers? But we do copy, we have to. The issue is who we copy. When we copy people, who are themselves copying people, it gets very confusing, messy and conflictual as we all

scramble for the same thing. But what happens when we deliberately copy someone who is in no way copying anyone else? Instead this One is **totally dedicated to copying God** and has a direct line making that possible. If we copy this One, we find ourselves pulled out of copying each other and freed from the tyranny of rivalry and envy. This is what Paul is talking about when he says, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord.” Since Paul is imitating Jesus, when you imitate Paul, you imitate Jesus. Now Paul wants us to carry this on by being an example for others. This is positive imitation and very healthy and quite different from negative imitation that always leads to conflict and exclusion.

If we think of ourselves as imitating Jesus, whose image orients us? Can the image of an emperor on a coin and all it represents, orient us, and conform or contort us into its image? Yes, it can, but when it does we are not imitating Jesus. We have allowed the image of a human to shape us, with all the consequences that evolve from that.

Paul commends the people in Thessalonica for *not* going that direction. No! He says, “You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.”

Lest we think the coming wrath is from God, I must explain one more thing. For Paul, the wrath that is coming is human wrath. We see it every where and it is breaking out all over and always has. **It is the wrath that happens when humans make other humans into their gods and cease serving the God in whose image we are made.** This is the wrath we live in the midst of (I am thinking here of the death of Cody Myers, the nineteen year old, Clackamas Community College student killed by two white supremacists as collateral damage in their rage-full war (wrath-full) to preserve the white race.). And it is in the midst of this that we “wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming, both in the sense of coming in the future and in the sense of constantly coming.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

