

**October 22, 2023 Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost**

**Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church**

**Genesis 1:26-31 Matthew 22:15-22**

**"Look in the Mirror"**

**Douglas T. King**

When we do officer orientation each year we spend a little time getting to know each other as a group. We gather in a circle and share something about ourselves. One of the questions I like to ask is "What do you always carry around with you?" It could be something that is in your pocket or wallet or purse. It could be a piece of jewelry. The answers are often illuminating, revealing something essential about each person. Over the years I have heard of people wearing their father's dog tags from military service; having a lock of hair from their child in their wallet; even carrying a wine cork from the night they got engaged in their purse. I always tell of the sea glass that is found in the pockets of many of my overcoats. I like reaching into my pocket and feeling the smoothness of it. For me it illuminates the reality that something that has been broken can have its rough edges polished over time. It is a consistent reminder to me that things can become more beautiful as they are worn down by the vicissitudes of living. That sea glass in my pocket says something about who I am and how I see life.

We will circle back to this issue of what we carry with us later on in the sermon, now on to the text. First a little background. Very few things could bring the Pharisees and Herodians, two groups who disagreed about just about everything, to be in common cause. In this case the cause was tripping up Jesus. They sought to do this with a proverbial hot button

issue. When the tax in question was first enacted there was an actual armed revolt. Paying a head tax to their Roman occupiers was not popular. And to add insult to injury the tax had to be paid with a denarius which had the following inscribed upon it. "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus and high priest." (Long, p.250)

Not only were the Jews being asked to pay a tax to their occupiers, they were asked to pay it with a coin that claimed Roman emperors were Gods. They were being told they had to deny the reality of the God they worshiped.

The Pharisees and the Herodians believed they had set up the perfect verbal trap for Jesus. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" If Jesus says it is unlawful to pay the tax then he will quickly be labeled as a dangerous insurrectionist by the Roman government and arrested. If Jesus says it is lawful to pay the tax the people will see him as someone who would rather save his own skin than stand up for the injustices against them. Tom Long expresses it this way, "Are you a foolish, uncompromising revolutionary whose allegiance to the kingdom of heaven is actually a political revolution in disguise, or are you a smooth-talking street preacher who stirs up people with glib talk of God's majesty but who underneath advocates a get-along-go-along policy with the Roman, Gentile pigs?" (Long, p. 251)

As we just heard in the text, Jesus does neither. He calls them hypocrites and demands that they show him the coin used for the tax. The Pharisees and Herodians hand him a denarius. He goes on to say, "'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."

At first it may seem that the point of this exchange is that Jesus has pulled off a fairly adept verbal parry which protects him from the ire of the people and prosecution by the Romans. But there is more going on here than that.

It is important to note that he has revealed something significant about his questioners. When Jesus holds up the denarius for his response to the question it does not come out of his pocket. It is the Pharisees and Herodians who carry the face of the emperor and his divine designation in their pockets. They have demonstrated where they stand and who they are. They have chosen who they will serve by what they carry with them.

What do we carry with us? What is on our person every day that reflects who we are? At the opening of this sermon I spoke about the physical objects we carry with us that reveal something about who we are, locks of hair, sea glass, dog tags. And those things do indeed show a portion of who we are. It might reveal some role in our life, devoted partner or loving parent. But we carry around something else that reveals the ultimate totality of who we are. It is something we cannot put down or misplace no matter how hard we try.

I am struck by what Jesus says when he is handed the coin. "Whose head is this, and whose title?" It is one thing to talk about what we carry around in our pocket, but there is something much more significant we carry around with us in all times and all places. Our very being. When we stop and look in a mirror we can ask the very same question, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" That face we see looking back at us is ours but it is more than that. In Genesis we are told that we are

created in the image of God. We carry this with us every moment of our lives. And the title we carry is "child of God." This, more than anything else, is inherently who we are, a child of God.

So what should we render unto God? What belongs to God? We do. We belong to God. All of who we are. And what belongs to God should be rendered unto God.

The gospel of Matthew is often referred to by scholars as the gospel of higher righteousness. When Jesus speaks it is always to raise the bar of how we are called to live. In Matthew we are not called to comfortable compromises but to total all-embodying commitment. Frankly the Gospel of Matthew often leaves me a little itchy. I feel like there is a chasm between where Jesus in Matthew is calling me to be and where I live my very compromised life. Instead of being inspired, I find that I can feel overwhelmed and defeated about my efforts to be sufficiently faithful.

In those moments if I happen to be wearing one of my overcoats I reach into my pocket and feel around for a piece of sea glass. My fingers slide over all of the delightfully smooth edges that were once so ragged and rough. I pull the piece out and admire the beauty that was formed over time from a broken piece of trash. I like to think that God's loving grace is like that. It just keeps working on us over time, polishing our rough edges and turning all that is broken within us into something beautiful; into more and more the likeness of the image of God in which we were created.

In the midst of the warring madness in our world, it is my fervent prayer that one day God's grace will lead us beyond all

of our divisions, beyond all of this violence, that we might recognize one another as beings created in the image of God.

Yes, on our own, we will fall short in rendering all of ourselves to God, in recognizing ourselves and others as created in God's image. But let us remember the question of title that Jesus raises regarding the coin also applies to us. Our title as the children of God assures us that although we will fail in rendering all of ourselves to God, God will render God's loving grace fully and completely to us. May we be led to a day in which we honor each other and ourselves with this title and God's grace is manifest throughout our world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Long, Thomas G., *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion Series*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1997.