

PROPER 24, PENTECOST 21, YEAR A, OCTOBER 22, 2023

When a baby is born one of the first things we ask is who does the baby look like? That's a fairly constant topic of conversation over the years as the child matures. Who does he/she look like? Or have you ever seen a photo of a relative from a generation ago and realize you are the spitting image of that person? I also think that there comes a time when we look in the mirror and say when did I become my mother or father.

However, it's not just about who we think we look like in our immediate family there are other images that cause us to pause and recognize a family resemblance with others. Have you ever looked at a photo or seen an image on TV and saw yourself in the tear stained face of a mother or father mourning the loss of their child from war or a natural disaster? It's an image that makes you imagine how you would feel in their place. And it doesn't matter what nationality they are because at that moment you identify with them at a gut level and recognize a family resemblance. Ultimately, it raises the question of who do we belong too? Do we belong just to our own family or kind or do we belong to the wider human family which God has created in God's image.

In today's Gospel the whole concept of image is explored. It comes up when Jesus is asked if the Jews should pay taxes to Caesar or not?" The Jews of that day disagreed about how to answer this question. Those whom we might call "realists" collaborated and cooperated with Rome and paid the tax probably as a survival strategy in order to avoid any undue attention from the iron fist of Rome. On the other hand, the "idealists" of a more nationalistic bent resented and protested Roman economic exploitation out of principle.

The Pharisees who despised Rome and the Herodians who cooperated with Rome were opposing parties, but in this story the enemies join forces. It's no surprise that what they really wanted was not an honest answer to a complicated question, but rather, as the gospel says, "to trap Jesus in his words."

That seemed easy enough. If Jesus agreed that the Jews should pay taxes to Caesar it would sound like capitulation to the oppressive Romans and a renunciation of Jewish nationalism. He would have lost his audience. But to answer in the negative and encourage tax evasion was political sedition that would have jeopardized his ministry and endangered anyone who followed him.

So, he asked them for the coin that was used to pay the state tax, and then asked whose image it bore. One side of the coin would have deified the current Caesar as a "son of the divine Augustus." The other side would have honored him as the chief priest of Roman polytheism—which is to say that the two sides of the coin celebrated the absolute religious and civil authority of Caesar.

To an observant Jew such a graven image was religiously offensive and politically humiliating. What should a conscientious Jew do? How would Jesus respond to this lose-lose proposition?

Well, Jesus responded with an enigmatic answer: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." Rather than making an inflammatory political statement by denouncing Rome, Jesus evaded their trap with a dismissive shrug — "If the coin belongs to Caesar, let him have it. So what? It's merely money." Jesus refused to take their bait.

But what about the second half of his answer? What do we owe to God? On that ancient coin was an image of Caesar, and Jesus basically said, it's merely money that is owed to him. On the other hand, and far more importantly, every human being bears the image of God, implying that we are to give to God our entire selves. So, pay your taxes to Caesar, and give your whole self to God. Jesus is reminding us that we are all the coinage of God.

But what does it mean to give God what belongs to God in these hard and divisive days? How do we bear forth God's image while our families, communities, and churches splinter over political and cultural differences that seem unbridgeable? Whose image do we reflect to the world and why is that important? How do we give our whole self to God or give God the things that are God's? This is where our choices come in. Foremost, it is through the way we go about living our daily lives. What I mean is that is being observant about the language we use or abuse, the stories we uphold or silence, the people we protect or oppress, the sins we confess or indulge, the truths we proclaim or deny. What we do and say on a daily basis makes all the difference in the world.

So, for us to give to God the things that are God's means acting in the power of God's Love in the world, using responsibly and wisely what we have been given to deal with in all the circumstances of our lives whether they be political, domestic, public, private or social welfare concerns.

It's easy to say it's not my job or problem and say to God you "do something" about the sufferings and problems people face in the world. However, God is doing something in the world through us telling us to use the gifts God has given us. We have to be attentive to where God's love is breaking into the world through the responses of people to the suffering and problems that surround us and then join in using all our abilities in the work of Love. As an image-bearer of a loving, forgiving, and gracious God, maybe what I owe God in this hour is the very grace and generosity God extends to me and to all of us.

In 1983 Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book called *When Bad things happen to Good People* which many of you might have read. Kushner considered it a breakthrough in his understanding of God when he stopped looking for fairness in the world and began to look for God's Love breaking through into the world via people's responses to their circumstances. He quotes a prayer that he believes is worth considering:

"We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end war; for we know that you made the world in a way that we must find our own path to peace within our self and with our neighbor.

We cannot pray to you, O God, to end starvation; for you have already given us the resources with which we could feed the entire world if we would only use them wisely.

We cannot merely pray to you O God, to root out prejudice, for you have already given us the eyes with which to see the good in all people if we only use them rightly.

We cannot merely pray to you, O God, to end despair for you have already given us the power to clear away slums and to give hope if we could only use our power justly.

We cannot pray to you O God to end disease for you have already given us great minds to search out cures and healing if we would only use them constructively.

Therefore, we pray to you instead O God, for strength, determination and willpower to do instead of just to pray, to become instead of merely to wish, that our world may be safe and that our lives may be blessed.

We need to remind ourselves if I really am fashioned in God's image then I really belong to God and I need to practice my faith and all aspects of my life in ways that reflect who God is. It's a question of remembering that the God whose image we bear is a God of endless and sacrificial love.

So, give to God, the things that are God's" and listen to the Spirit of God calling us to see the diversity of God in all people and to use our abilities to join in the work of spreading God's love in the world. Amen