

Engraved on the soul
Matthew 22:15-21, Pentecost 23, Year A
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By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

So Griffin and I are reading the Harry Potter books together, those fantastic allegories of light and darkness that rival even the Lord of the Rings trilogy. We've recently finished the fifth book, the *Order of the Phoenix*, in which the sadistic Delores Umbridge comes to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry as a teacher. It doesn't take Harry long to get on the wrong side of Professor Umbridge, and he quickly finds himself in her office serving detention.

Professor Umbridge forces Harry to write lines, a punishment all of us can recall with dread, but in Harry's case the professor insists that he use her magic quill. As Harry writes "I will not tell lies" with his right hand again and again on the parchment in front of him, to his horror the same words are carved into the back of his left hand. With each repetition of the line, the impression on his left hand becomes deeper and deeper, until finally Harry is left bleeding, sure to have a scar.

The account is terrifying, the stuff of students' nightmares, and Professor Umbridge's intention is clear. *We become that which is engraved upon us.* She understands this, and she hopes to break Harry's spirit, engraving upon his soul as on his hand the belief that he is a liar, one who is unreliable and weak.

Jesus' world is one plagued by anxiety. The people in Judea face economic turmoil and political uncertainty. (Sound familiar?) People are in a constant state of nervousness, wondering how they can endure all the difficulties life keeps heaping on them.

The Pharisees approach Jesus today in the midst of this anxiety, and they ask whether it is lawful for faithful Jews to pay the census tax to Rome. As we read this passage today, it's easy to assume that the question asked is a narrow and specific one about governmental revenue. But it isn't. The question of paying the Roman tax is symbolic, and both the Pharisees and Jesus recognize it as such. In the midst of a confusing and anxious world, the Pharisees are asking Jesus to declare to whom faithful people should give their allegiance and from whom strength can be found in troubled times. The Pharisees claim loudly and insistently that they find their strength in God alone. With puffed up confidence they hope to trip Jesus up.

In response to their question, Jesus—who, it's important to note, carries no coin—asks for an example of the coin used to pay the Roman tax. Without pause, some Pharisee produces a

coin, undoubtedly from his pocket or purse, perhaps warmed by the closeness with which he holds it to his body.

Jesus asks the Pharisees whose image is engraved on the Roman coin. The answer he receives is “Caesar,” and the coin’s inscription is “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus.” In other words, the coin claims that the one engraved upon it is, in fact, *a god*. And Jesus reveals that the Pharisees, who claim to take their sustenance from God alone, in fact rest almost unconsciously on the strength and succor of Rome. They traffic in the false god’s coinage, and consequently Caesar is engraved upon their hearts just as surely as he is engraved on the coins in their pockets. Jesus ends the conversation by saying, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and give to God what is God’s,” but we dare not miss the implication: Jesus carries no Roman coin; for Jesus, *all* is God’s, and God is all that should be inscribed upon us, heart and soul.

On a tiny, remote island in the Hebrides, off the west coast of Scotland, a small group of Christians endured more hardship and challenge than we can scarcely imagine. In the 600s, long before the great gothic cathedrals had established the centers of Christian life and worship, the Christians on Iona single-handedly spread the faith throughout pagan Scotland and northern England.

These evangelist monks traveled on foot into hostile lands. They carried nothing but the message of God’s goodness and love. This was not yet the age when the Church enjoyed the protection of kings. The monks suffered from violent princes and violent bandits. They endured some of the harshest weather known to man. To add insult to injury, one day the longships of Norse Vikings landed on Iona’s northern coast. Forty monks walked out onto the white sands of the beach with empty and open arms to meet their invaders. All forty were cut down where they stood.

How did they do it? How did these Christians maintain their faith—their grounding—in the face of such unrelenting and often life-threatening challenge?

There is a clue to be found on the island of Iona. It began as a vast, single slab of blank stone. But one day thirteen hundred years ago a Christian whose name is lost to time picked up his chisel and awl and carved an impression in that stone. That first mark stretched and curved, and a second Christian, perhaps wearied from travel or injured from assault, came and joined in the engraving. More came, and months passed, and the blank slab of stone began to take shape. First, a cross—the symbol of resurrection and new life—emerged. Then a ring was carved around the cross, creating what we now know as a familiar Celtic symbol but one that was potent

to them as a reminder that God's grace surrounds all things. And finally the entire face of the cross was deeply engraved with an endlessly interwoven, fruit-bearing vine, reminding the monks that their winding journeys through life were not random but rather intended by God to bear fruit wherever they might go, sowing love among those in need of love.

Every day for perhaps years the monks gathered to engrave what the world now knows as St. Martin's cross. I can imagine them up before dawn and long after nightfall lovingly and committedly returning to this task: chiseling, smoothing, feeling the contours of the stone. And with each stroke, *the cross was engraved upon their souls*. In their lives, they became what it symbolized: resurrection, the circle of grace, the life-giving vine. Thirteen hundred years later the cross still stands on Iona seventeen feet high. *Their faith* still stands strong on that holy island.

In our own anxious time marked by economic meltdown, political uncertainty, and ample fear, what do we engrave upon our souls? The false gods from which to choose are too numerous to count. All around us there are images and messages of resentment, violence, shallow relationships, unbridled consumption...the list is endless. Like the Pharisees who unconsciously rationalized using Caesar's coin, we see and hear these false gods so often that we may fail to recognize them for what they are. Slowly and insidiously they engrave themselves onto our hearts and souls, and they are as injurious to us as the jagged lines cut into the back of Harry Potter's hand. Because when crisis comes—in the form of sickness, personal misfortune, or widespread economic panic—we may find that the resources we need to endure are lacking. We may find that *we have become the things engraved upon us*: we have become resentful people, shallow people, frightened people.

But here's the Good News: No matter how pocked our souls may be, God's grace can engrave upon them something new. Marks that are chiseled jagged and rude God can rework into the shape of a cross. God can encircle the soul with that love that, in truth, surrounds all things. God can make our lives a life-giving vine. But for God to work, we must first make room. In our lives, we must choose to which messages and images we will give our attention. In the way we spend our hours and our days—working, praying, dwelling, and loving—we must decide in whom we will find our grounding. We must choose either the gods of this world, or God.

How wondrous might it be if, in some future time when men and women look back upon *our* troubled days, they acknowledge the signs of *our* faith. How wondrous it would be if we left

through the testament of our lives in these times a symbol like the cross that still stands on Iona,
revealing to those who come after us what was engraved upon our souls.

Amen.