

**20th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
**October 18, 2020**

Text: Matthew 22:15-22  
Theme: In God We Trust

Let us start with a little bit of humor this morning! A young lady was sitting on a beach in Florida, enjoying the sun. A small boy dressed in swimming trunks (and carrying a towel) came up to her and asked her a series of questions. His first question was this: Do you believe in God? His question took her by surprise but she replied: Yes I do. Then he asked her: Do you go to church every Sunday? Once more her answer was yes. He then asked: Do you read your Bible and pray every day? She answered in the affirmative. By now her curiosity was very much aroused until the boy sighed with relief and asked one more question: Will you hold my quarter while I go swimming?

It is mid-October but Christmas movies are already being shown on some of our favorite television channels. My all-time favorite holiday movie is the original *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*. And the best part of the movie is towards the end when the young girl, Susan, interrupts the court hearing against Kris Kringle. She walks forward with a big smile on her face and hands Judge Harper a Christmas card with a \$1 bill inside. When he holds the dollar bill in his hand he notices a red circle on the part that reads – *In God We Trust*. Because of those four words the case against Kris Kringle is dropped.

Here is a bit of history about coins and dollar bills. Those four words (*In God We Trust*) were placed on United States currency during the Civil War. In the initial letter written to the Secretary of the Treasury, a pastor asked him: What if our Republic were shattered beyond reconstruction? Would the succeeding generations rightly reason from our past that we were a heathen nation? In response the Secretary wrote to the Director of the Mint to say: No nation can be strong except in the strength of God or safe except in his defense. The trust of our people in God should be declared on our national coins. Prepare without unnecessary delay a motto expressing in the fewest words possible this national recognition. And that is how – *In God We Trust* – became printed on our coins and bills. Keep that thought as we turn to the lesson in Matthew.

A dispute is brewing between Jesus and the religious leaders and it is becoming serious. In this exchange they are setting a trap for Jesus that they believe is full-proof. They have to get rid of him once and for all. They have to get the crowds to start disliking him. So the question they pose – *Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?* – is very clever! Should Jesus answer in the affirmative the crowds would likely be in an uproar because it challenged their Jewish laws. Should he answer in the negative then he would have positioned himself over and against the Romans which was never a wise thing to do. So they got him (or so they think)!

But this is Jesus and if their question is clever then his response is nothing less than ingenious and inspiring and leads to an exchange that is as revealing as it is brief. He answered the question by asking them to hand him the coin used for such a tax. He then asked them to tell him whose image was on the coin and whose title. There was only one answer – it was the emperor. At this point Jesus turned this into a theological lesson. Give to the emperor the things that are his, and give to God the things that belong to God.

With this one sentence Jesus does not evade their trap or confound their plans but he issues a challenge to his listeners. Whose image is on the coin and whose title? Fair enough! Give to the emperor the things that are his. But there is more. Where do we see the image of God? And then we remember that on our coins and bills that we carry in our pockets it is stated in the words – *In God We Trust!* No nation can be strong except in the strength of God.

In Genesis 1:26 it reads from the Hebrew translation: And God said – *Let us make humankind in our image (according to our likeness)*. It is interesting that the word for *likeness* used in the Greek translation of Genesis is also the word Matthew chose in verse 20. We do not know how many of the people present would have caught that distinction. But for those who listened closely to Jesus' word choice they would have been taken back to God's initial pronouncement and promise. We are the ones who bear the likeness of God.

Let us pause to let that sink in for a moment. We are made in the image and likeness of God. And because we bear his likeness we are then to act like God.

We are not to be like the religious leaders who lord their authority over others for self-gain. We are to mirror God. We are to stand with the One who creates and sustains and nurtures and redeems and saves – no matter what the cost. We are called to serve as his agents, as his partners, as his co-workers. We are called to exercise dominion over his all creation (not as an act of power) but rather as an act of faithful stewardship.

Notice that despite the fact that Jesus' opponents carried a coin with a graven image and made bold confessions about the emperor, Jesus did not accuse them of blasphemy nor disloyalty. Rather he called them *hypocrites*. They literally took to wearing a false likeness. These religious leaders who were doing their very best to entrap or discount Jesus forgot who they were and in whose likeness they were made.

Our gospel lesson for today calls us back to our primary identity as children of God and stewards of his creation. We are made in the likeness of God and charged to act like the God we see in Jesus. I wonder if Jesus is asking us these same question. I do not believe that he is trying to trap us but rather inviting us to declare our allegiance. Perhaps the key issues in this exchange is not whose image is on the coin but rather whose image is on us.

It is interesting that so far the words – *In God We Trust* – remain on our currency. After the September 11 attacks in 2001 many public schools across the United States posted those words in framed posters in libraries, cafeterias, and classrooms. In 2003 a poll was taken that showed that 90% of Americans supported the inscription on our coins and bills. In 2006 (on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its adoption) the Senate reaffirmed it as the official national motto. Florida adopted it as their state motto. Moving forward in time in June of 2020 the Mississippi Governor signed into law a bill requiring the state flag be replaced with a new one that contained these same words.

When we pull out a coin and see these words it is our reminder that we are made in the image of God and we are to act like God. It reaffirms that our strength as a nation transcends any single religious faith tradition but will be forever our most powerful resource in peace and war. As we bear the image of God we become citizens of his kingdom.

But Jesus is not dividing the world into two equal realms. His answer that we hear today acknowledges our obligations to our government but affirms our greater obligation to God. Coins that bear the image of the emperor belong to the emperor but all things come from God and are under the care of God. In God we trust! Amen