

On Reflections and Likeness

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "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?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "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" When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away. – Matthew 22:15-22

A while back, I found a spare coffee mug in the office. Spare, because it was in the cabinet in the common area of the church office. It was an abandoned mug, the best kind. I'm what you might call a connoisseur of mugs. I like the various shapes, materials, and styles of mugs. And this mug was very nice. I've always thought that a nice mug can alter a first impression. A mug can light up a room. A great mug can make you feel incredible about what you are putting into your body! I know this is TMI, but welcome to my world.

The only thing that bothered me about this mug was the color. It was a maroon mug. It was a Texas A&M mug. As much as it pained my burnt orange heart to place my lips on such a mug, still, it became my office mug... at least for a little while

One day, at a staff meeting, Kaleigh (our Youth Director) spotted me with the mug. "Hey!" She cried out. "I've been looking everywhere for that mug." Then I remembered, she's an Aggie... Now, some of the best people I've known in my life are Aggies, don't misunderstand me. But the thing about Aggies is that they carry with them an aura of aggie-ness. You know when you are in the presence of an aggie. They will wear their aggie swag for years after they leave college. They will talk of their Aggie days like they happened yesterday. They will spout useless trivia about how Aggies saved Texas, and Texas saved the U.S., and the U.S. saved the world. So, Aggies, along with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, saved the world! It's like folks into CrossFit; it's only a matter of time until all conversation turns toward their life as a cross fitter.

I can poke and tease all day, but it is a powerful thing; how a school can imprint their likeness on a student so that wherever they go, however far they travel, they can point back to a shared identity as Aggies. They can say with confidence, "That is my alma matter, and you can't take that away from me... even when you take my coffee mug."

Our scripture reading today is a tricky scripture. Jesus' famous words, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," has been used throughout history to fortify various stances within the long-running discussion of the collision of politics and religion. *Don't bring your politics to church*, you might have heard someone proclaim! Or, *your faith shouldn't form your political stances!*

Jesus' responses are sometimes hard to swallow. They are hard because they often cause us to reflect inwardly. If we open our hearts to Jesus, we are often convicted of who it is that is actually in

control, whose we are in that revelation, and what we ought to do about it. And as the passage implies, in our amazement, we are faced with a choice.

From a chronological perspective, this scripture is situated right after the parable of the wicked tenant and the parable of the wedding banquet. Why is this important?

In the parable of the wicked tenant, Jesus denounces the stewardship of those who were charged to keep the faith. *When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds because they (the people) regarded him as a prophet. – Matthew 21:45-46*

Jesus is speaking directly to the religious authorities and rendering a substantial judgment against their rule. We know that the crowds following Jesus are becoming an issue for the ruling authorities.

In the very next parable, Jesus opens, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son...”

Historically, we have to keep in mind these stories are being told in the context of the Roman empire! The preceding chapter had Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, the same way that King David made Solomon King (1 Kings 1:28-40). Jesus entered to the reception of a large group of people. And now, Jesus, to the crowds that are following him and to the ruling authorities, is preaching of a coming kingdom! These are the grounds in which we arrive at the scripture today.

It’s the Pharisees and the so-called Herodians that make their way toward Jesus, with malice in their hearts. It is significant that the text explicitly mentions the pairing of the Pharisees’ disciples and the Herodians. The Herodians’ power would have originated from Roman rule. Essentially, they would have been proxies of the Roman empire, given power so long as they keep the region in check. To entrap Jesus by tricking Jesus into speaking against the empire, they might have had legal recourse to get rid of Jesus.

As the story goes, they hand Jesus a denarius and ask him if it is lawful to voluntarily give Caesar tribute. It's a brilliant set-up.

Coins were Rome’s way of hammering home who had complete sovereignty in the land. It was a constant reminder of who had power, even in the daily lives of the Jews. There’s a lot at stake in Jesus’ response.

If he wilts and in anyway assents to the tax. he will damage his reputation as a prophet. The religious population who hated Roman rule and their taxation would see him as a weak representation of their faith.

If he overtly speaks against the tribute, the Herodians - taking account of Jesus’ rhetoric of a coming kingdom and the large crowds that followed him - would have all the proof they need that Jesus is leading an insurrection against Rome.

Then comes the moment of truth. Jesus takes the coin and poses a question, “Whose image is this, and whose inscription?”

The word for image, eikon in Greek, is directly parallel to the term used for likeness in Hebrew. The same word from Genesis when God said, “*Let us make man in our image, our Likeness...*” The Pharisees, being teachers of the Law, would have recognized this rhetorical move by Jesus. Jesus is essentially saying, *give back to Caesar this token of his sovereignty, this reminder of his power. It ought to have no control over you, you who were made in the likeness of the Most Holy God, you who know well that Caesar's claim to absolute sovereignty in your lives is a direct contradiction to God's complete claim on your life! God made you; God desires you. God loves you. Whose likeness do you carry, that of Caesar's or that of God's? You sell outs!*

My interpretation sounds harsh, but Jesus actually said, *hypocrites*. That was Jesus! I feel like I’m being generous!

For the Herodians and Pharisees, they clung to a source of influence and power that they knew could not align with their Jewish faith! Why?! Because it kept them in power. It kept them secure in their social status. It kept them COMFORTABLE. In other words, their reliance on the temporal powers and influences of their day took precedence over the eternal claim of sovereignty that the ultimate power and influence, God, ought to hold. They gained the world and they forfeited their souls!

What about us? What symbols of power and influence are we in danger of giving too high a place? Where have we compromised God’s ultimate sovereignty in our lives for notions of comfort, convenience, or power?

This may seem trivial, but we must recognize that this move, even in our hearts, is critical. What did Jesus say, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” And where our heart is, so goes our attention, time, and energy!

Do we compromise our status as God’s children, made in God’s likeness for lesser things? Do we give power to certain symbols so that they define us? Do we sell out? Does our faith become a commodity that only has power in our lives in moments of convenience or moments of personal gain? Is Christ Lord of our lives, every part of them? Is Christ Lord over our careers, our civic offices, our jobs, our relationships, our politics?!

Let me be clear, I didn’t bring up Aggies at the beginning of this sermon to use them as examples of people who exchanged their status as God’s children for that of children of Texas A&M. Many of the Aggies I know, Kaleigh included, are also among the best Christians I know.

The symbols that we fill our lives with, the signs that we pay homage to voluntarily, are only as powerful as what they can give. Nationalistic identity, political party persuasion, money, the maker of our cars, our collegiate allegiances, our symbols on our coffee mugs, cannot give us life – though some claim that feat. If we are using these symbols, as the Pharisees used them, to retain power over others, to retain a sense of self-importance at the expense of championing symbols or people who stand in blatant contradiction of basic Christian values, we ought to reexamine our fidelity toward them. Our representation, our image, our likeness was made in God. You, all of us here, were made in the image and likeness of God. Shouldn’t our lives point to the person we ultimately profess has absolute power? In that witness, there can be no contradiction.

The denarius ends with Caesar. Our lives end with God. God is good, God is true, and God is beautiful. God is love. In God's likeness, we were made. What a lovely gift! We should never allow ourselves or those around us to settle for any cheap imitation of or twisted use of power that aims to claim us. We should stand against those who would seek to exploit others using such powers.

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God, the things that are God's" Your life is God's. This is both a gift and a responsibility. Go and carry God's likeness into every facet of your life. Amen.