Title: God’s Love On The Move

Text: Matthew 22:15-22
Preacher: Eddie Bellis
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They came to trap Jesus. Matthew tells us that before they ever open their mouths. They have already had the meeting. Disciples of the Pharisees have teamed up with the Herodians, two groups who usually cannot stand each other. They have worked out the question, and it is a good one: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Yes or no. Just pick one.

Remember, Rome occupied their land, controlled their lives, and collected their taxes. If Jesus says, “Yes, pay the tax,” his own people will hear him siding with Rome. If he says, “No,” Rome will hear rebellion. In their minds, the questioners whisper, “Say yes, Jesus and some of your people may turn against you. Say no, and Rome may want a word with you.” It is a great trap, and they know it.

So, they wait. Jesus says, “Show me the coin used for the tax.”

Someone reaches into a pocket. Matthew doesn't tell us who. What we do know is somebody has one - a denarius. They hand it forward, a small piece of metal – hard and cold, warmed perhaps by the pocket that carried it. The coin has passed from hand to hand, market to market, tax collector to taxpayer, Caesar's face rubbed by a thousand thumbs. Now it moves again.

From their hands and into the hands of Jesus.

Isn’t that interesting? They question Jesus about his relationship to Caesar, and they carry Caesar around in their pockets.

Jesus holds the coin. Perhaps he turns it over. His thumb moves across the emperor's face. And he looks up from the coin and asks, “Whose image is this?”

They say, “The emperor's.”

Of course. Caesar's face is stamped right there on the coin, and around the edge runs his title, “Tiberius Ceasar, son of the divine August.” Ceasar did not merely claim the tax. He claimed to be son of a god. And he put his image everywhere, on coins, buildings, and monuments, so that everyone would know what belonged to Caesar.

Jesus looks at the coin and then he says, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's…” Well, all right. If Caesar's image is on the coin, give Caesar his coin. Give it back.

But Jesus isn't finished. He drops the second part like a bomb. He says, “…and to God the things that are God's.”

And with that statement, the trap disappears. Jesus has moved the question, hasn’t he? They asked about taxes, and Jesus is talking about ownership. They asked about Caesar. Jesus is talking about God. They asked about a coin. And Jesus leaves one question hanging in the air: “What belongs to God?”

Well, what does? The hills? The Psalmist says God owns "the cattle on a thousand hills." The rivers? The fields? The harvest? The morning? The stars? All of creation? Yes, all of it belongs to God.

But Jesus asked about an image. So, what bears God's image? For that, we go back to the Bible's first pages, where God says, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness."

Oh, that's another image. Caesar's image is stamped onto dead metal. God's image breathes. God's image laughs, cries, gets hungry, grows old, and holds babies. God's image sits beside hospital beds, sometimes walks with a cane, sometimes forgets where the car keys are, and sometimes needs someone else to hold the cup.

God's image is you and me. God's image is the person beside us, and the person across the aisle. The person we love. And yes, even the person we find exceedingly difficult to love. God's image is the person who has plenty, and the person wondering whether there will be enough. God's image is all of us.

And now Jesus' answer sounds different. Caesar can have the coin. "…and to God the things that are God's." I belong to God, and you belong to God. The whole living, breathing person bears the image.

Notice something else about the coin. It travels everywhere, hand to hand and market to market, and it never stops being Ceasar's. Where it goes, it points back to him. We travel too. And wherever we go, we bear an image that points back to God. The only question is what that image looks like in motion.

That means stewardship may begin somewhere different from where we usually begin. We tend to begin with "How much?" How much should I give? How much can I afford? How much does the church need?

All these are reasonable questions. But Jesus asks a question beneath them all. Not: "How much?" but "Whose?" Whose are you? Whose am I? And the answer is: we are God's precious creatures made in God's own image.

Now, depending upon what kind of God you imagine, that could be terrifying. If God is merely a celestial accountant keeping track of what we owe, belonging to God doesn't sound much like good news. So, before we talk about giving, we need another question. What is this God like whose image we bear?

And Scripture answers: our God gives. Before there was an offering plate, God gave. Before there was a pledge card, God gave.

"In the beginning…" God gives light. God gives water. God gives earth beneath our feet. God gives seed and harvest. God gives breath. God gives life.

When God's people are trapped in Egypt, God hears their cries and moves toward them. And when they don't know the way through the wilderness, God goes ahead of them as a cloud by day, and fire by night.

When Ezekiel stands in a valley of dry bones, God says, "Prophesy to the breath." And breath comes, the bones connect, and bodies rise. What was dead moves. God's love is on the move.

But if we really want to know what this God is like, John puts it into one sentence: “For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son.” God loved, and God gave. God gives God’s own self. In Jesus Christ, God moves into our neighborhood and pitches a tent, as God dwells in the Tent of Meeting in the Wilderness. God’s love moves into our suffering, into our loneliness, into our grief, and into our death. God comes toward us with mercy, with grace, and with life. At God’s heart, God’s love moves and gives.

Now we understand something about the image we bear. If we bear the image of a giving God, generosity is more than an obligation. It is the family resemblance.

We don’t give so that God will love us, or so that we can belong to God. God’s love moved first. Before we ever open our hands, God opens God’s hands in Jesus. So, what if stewardship is learning to notice where God's gifts are trying to go? What if something God has placed in your hands has a destination you cannot yet see? We have seen that happen here.

God's love is on the move when we work alongside our friends at Mountain Top Ministries. God's love is on the move when our women make their way to Montreat, carrying their lives and questions with them, worshiping, laughing, listening, and returning home having heard something new from God and from one another.

God's love is on the move when one of our third graders walks to the front of this sanctuary, and we place a Bible into those young hands. Think about that Bible. We don't know where it is going. Someday it may go into a backpack headed for college. It may sit on a nightstand beside a hospital bed. Years from now those same hands may open it for a frightened child or place a Bible into somebody else’s hands. We rarely know how far a gift will travel. That’s part of the wonder of giving.

And then there is the Table. Sometimes someone who belongs at this Table cannot get here anymore because of age or illness, a body that simply cannot make the journey. So, what do we do? We let the Table move. Someone takes a little bread and a little cup, gets in a car, and drives across Franklin. They pull into a driveway, walk to the door, and wait a bit longer than usual for someone to answer. And then two or three people sit together in a living room.

The bread moves, and the cup moves. Jesus’ Table moves. God’s grace moves. Nobody stops belonging to the Body of Christ simply because their body can no longer get through these doors.

God’s love moves in places that will never appear in the church bulletin. It moves when we carry soup across the street. When we learn the grocery clerk's name. When we sit on the porch with a neighbor who has run out of words. When we forgive somebody who may never understand what that forgiveness cost us. When we notice the person everyone else has learned not to see.

No committee approved it. It was not in the budget. Nobody announced it from the pulpit. And still, God’s love moved.

That is stewardship. What God has given to us does not stop with us. It moves from one generation to another, from this Table to another table, and from this sanctuary into somebody's home. From God to us and through us toward someone else.

And yes, sometimes it moves through a check or pledge. Someone decides that what God has placed in their hands was never intended to stop there. Not because money itself is holy. Remember the coin. Caesar's face is on that.

But because when people who bear God's image open their hands, what God has entrusted to them moves toward somebody else.

We did not start this story. Long before most of us arrived at First Presbyterian Franklin, somebody was here. Someone prayed. Someone taught. Someone welcomed the stranger. Someone put money into an offering plate without knowing our names, giving for a future they would never see. And we are living in that future.

Something once left their hands and eventually reached ours: a building, a Bible, a Reformed tradition, a faith, and a place at the Table.

So, we keep asking, “How much?” Jesus asks, “Whose are we?” We ask, “What should I give?” Jesus asks, “To whom do you belong?”

And the answer comes before the pledge, before the offering, and before anything we could possibly do. We bear God's image. We belong to God, and we belong to the God who gives. God’s love has been moving for a very long time, across creation, across wilderness, across generations, across tables, across hospital rooms, across mountains, and across this congregation, until somehow, it reached each of us.

And now, where will it go?

Jesus is still standing there with that little coin. His thumb moves across Caesar's face one more time. He asks, “Whose image is this?” We say, “Caesar's.” And the coin goes back into somebody's hand. Eventually it will go back into somebody's pocket. But the question doesn’t. The question stays with us.

Whose image is this? Let us look at our hands. Look at the faces around this room. Look at the bread and at the cup. Look at everything God has placed within our reach.

Sometime this week, when we least expect it, something will move from our hands into somebody else’s: a Bible, a check, a casserole, an hour, a word of forgiveness, and a place at the Table. And when it happens, we'll recognize it. The family resemblance. The image of the God who gives. Friends, God's love is still on the move.