



In Whose Image?

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
Sunday, October 19, 2008*

Matthew 22:15–22:

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.

We just read the latest in a long series of “Jesus confronting the religious leaders[’]” stories found in the Gospels. In today’s installment, Jesus outwits the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians who have come to see him with the sole intent of trapping him by getting him either to say that the people do not need to pay taxes to Rome, a move that would probably lead to his arrest, or by getting him to say that they should pay taxes, thus causing him to be discredited in the eyes of the Jewish people. But Jesus turns the tables on them by refusing to directly answer their question. Instead, deftly avoiding their trap, he tells them to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar but give to God that which is God’s. Game, set and match—Jesus. And the religious leaders leave in “amazement” as our translation puts it, but might better be translated as they left “disgruntled and embarrassed.”

The obvious question Jesus raises but does not answer is, so what belongs to God? And at this point we can easily get side-tracked into believing that this story is all about money—beginning to do all sorts of calculations, categorizing what belongs to whom, what percent of what we have we think is God’s and what is ours. And by all means put some thought into dividing up your money—be thoughtful about what you spend. One wise friend of mine once told me if I really wanted to know what my priorities in life were I should read through my checkbook. So being conscious and deliberate stewards is a good thing. But if we think that money is the whole point of this story we are wildly off base. Jesus asks whose image is on the coin, but the deeper question is whose image is on *us*? In whose image are we made and to whom do we belong? The answer, so neatly provided in the creation story, is that we are made in God’s image. We belong to God. All of us. Not just some parts of us. And all that we have is a gift from God. Not just some of it. Because we are made in God’s image, all that we are and all that we have—our very being—is God’s. That is an easy thing to forget in the minutiae of life—to forget that we have been created out of love and that we bear on us, within us the very mark of that love, the mark of the divine. It is easy to forget that the name given to us by our Creator, sealed in our baptism, the most important name we bear, is beloved child of God.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams tells the following story.

Rabbi Yehuda Loew ben Bezalel was the greatest rabbi of his age in Europe, the man who, in his house in Prague, created the Golem, the animated form of a man, to which he gave life by putting under its tongue a slip of paper bearing the unutterable name of God. One night the Rabbi had a dream: he dreamed that he had died and was brought before the throne. And the angel who stands before the throne said to him, “Who are you?” “I am Rabbi Yehuda of Prague, the maker of the Golem,” he replied. “Tell me, my lord, if my name is written in the book of the names of those who will have a share in the kingdom.” “Wait here,” said the angel. “I shall read the names of all those who have died today that are written in the book.” And he read the names, thousands of them, strange names to the ears of Rabbi Yehuda; as the angel read, the rabbi saw the spirits of those whose names had been called fly into the glory that sat above the throne. At last he finished reading, and Rabbi Yehuda’s name had not been called, and he wept bitterly and cried out against the angel. The angel said,

“I have called your name.” Rabbi Yehuda said, “I did not hear it.” And the angel said, “In the book are written the names of all men and women who have ever lived on the earth, for every soul is an inheritor of the kingdom. But many come here who have never heard their true names on the lips of man or angel. They have lived believing they know their names; and so when they are called to their share in the kingdom, they do not hear their names as their own. They do not recognize that it is for them that the gates of the kingdom are opened. So they must wait here until they hear their names and know them. Perhaps in their lifetime one man or woman has once called them by their right name: here they shall stay until they have remembered. Perhaps no one has ever called them by their right name: here they shall stay until they are silent enough to hear the King of the Universe calling them*.”

It is indeed God who calls us by our right name, God who recognizes us for what we are—beloved children—even when we cannot hear our name, when we do not recognize ourselves as beloved of God. Even when we behave like petulant contrary children. We are at heart, God’s own. This is the great promise God has made in scripture and has shown to be true again and again in human history.

The tricky part, of course, is believing it to be so. We hear so many other voices seeking to define us that it is easy to lose the most important voice in the din. We believe the other name or names we are given. We accept the other identities we are given. But the voice is there if we will listen—listen and believe it as it gives us another name, as it calls to our true identity. And our job is to hear that name, to accept that identity—and then live by it.

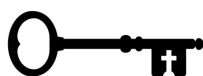
Of course to hear God calling us by our true name, to recognize whose we are, begs a response, which is why we may sometimes willfully stick our fingers in our ears and pretend not to hear. Because part of that response is recognizing that others are indeed God’s beloved, even those we are pretty sure God should dislike or at least ignore. Which is one reason that joining with others today in celebrating the children’s Sabbath is so important. We need to be reminded on occasion that because we are God’s beloved, we are required to manifest that love as best we can for every child of God in justice and peace.

In this country 1 in 3 black boys born in 2001 will go to prison in his lifetime, while only 1 in 17 white boys will do so. Our prisons are overflowing while 47% of our children in Philadelphia will not finish high school, leaving graduation stages empty. In this country children are abused at an alarming and ever—increasing rate: a report is made every 10 seconds, and four children die every day as a result of child abuse. Each day 2,483 children are born into poverty in this rich nation, and 8.7 million children have no health insurance. I could continue with the grim statistics, but I won’t because we all know that things are bad. And we know it is wrong. And we know we need to do something about it—however small each of our individual responses may be, we know we have to act. And I have to be honest that I am very worried right now—worried that in this time of great financial difficulty the most vulnerable will be the first thrown over the edge. It is easy in times of turmoil to let fear overwhelm us and cause us to contract in on ourselves, to put blinders on us. And I am not Pollyanna—I know these are scary times. I see my 401K becoming a 201K, as a friend of mine quipped the other day, and the length of time I will need to work before retirement increasing. And I know that there will be many, many people right here in this community deeply affected by our national financial turmoil. I know this fear. And it is indeed very important that we take care of ourselves—that we don’t forget to breathe. And I know we may need to do some painful reprioritizing and reorganizing of our lives. But I also know that we cannot let fear control us. We cannot allow it to push us into defining the world as “us” versus “them” or “me” versus “them.” I know that, despite our losses, we are still among the wealthiest people on the earth. And I know that there is in fact still enough to go around. What we need to do is to trust in the God who created us and calls each of us beloved. Trust that we have the resources we need to take care of each other, particularly the most vulnerable. We need to trust that we can take care of ourselves *and* we can make a difference in the lives of children, even just as one person or one congregation. We can volunteer to read at an after-school program, tutor a child who is in academic trouble or be a Big Brother or Big Sister. We can donate food or time to our Food Cupboard or to Camp Get-Along. We can write letters to our senators and representatives urging them to craft legislation and vote with the interests of *all* children at heart, and we can hold them accountable by how we vote.

We can do this, as small as it may seem, even in frightening times, because we as people of God know something that others may not. We know that our worth comes from God and not from money or possessions. We know that right here at St. Peter’s we are gifted with an abundance of skills and stories, with opportunities for love and service. We know our dependence on God, our identity as the image of God, the source of every good thing, including life itself. And most importantly, we know we are gifted with one another.

So, if you have to, worry about Caesar a little bit—and give Caesar his due. But give God your very self.

*Williams, Rowan, *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections*, Cowley Publications, 1995.



Open hearts. Open minds.