

What is God's
Matthew 22.15-22
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Pentecost +20A
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Like so many people across the country, my family was swept up in *Hamilton* fever all of last year (and maybe much of this year, too.) Last year's Halloween was surely the only time in the history of Trick-or-Treating that children dressed as Alexander Hamilton on their quest for full size candy bars in the most heavily decorated neighborhoods across town. In listening to the soundtrack of *Hamilton* over and over again, the music became part of our conversations at home and occasionally continues to be something of a mental soundtrack when just the right word triggers a song. The gospel lesson for today is ultimately about telling life stories, and I can't talk about telling stories without singing to myself of "The Story of Tonight" about a night when Alexander Hamilton, John Laurens, Hercules Mulligan and Marquis de Lafayette declared their loyalty to one another and toasted to the burgeoning revolution against the British. In the scene, they sing together of a movement being solidified in that moment but also the story that will be told for years to come—a story that will draw others to their movement, a story that will change their home, a story that their children and their children's children will tell about what that group of men began. *Hamilton* ends with the poignant "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story." After the death of Alexander Hamilton, George Washington steps onto the stage and sings "Let me tell you what I wish I'd known/When I was young and dreamed of glory/You have no control," then the rest of the cast joins in: "Who lives, who dies, who tells your story."

These songs are getting at forgotten stories, stolen stories, ignored stories of life cut short, life ignored because it was female or other, and history ignored that really deserves to be an ongoing narrative. Somehow those two songs were on repeat in my mind as I read this story of Jesus, the Herodians, and the Pharisees and the famous phrase: *Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's.*" We likely know these words even if we don't know much about the scripture around them. As I have studied the text, continued from last week's questions around authority and why does Jesus think he can say and do the things he's saying and

doing, I hear an invitation to consider our story and how it gets told. It's the story of our faith, the story of our congregation, and the story of each of us as individuals. What will our story be? Who will tell it? Will it reflect the best of our hopes or the worst of our choices? Does our final story tell the story of Caesar or the story of God? That's the question Jesus lobs back to the folks who are trying to trap him.

The case against Jesus is growing, in fact, and Matthew's gospel is leading us toward his arrest and crucifixion in these Temple encounters. One of the stories we need to reclaim about Jesus is WHY people would arrest and crucify him. WHAT was he doing that had people so worked up. Was it simply a matter of the deep, deep love of Jesus? He was so just such a tremendously nice guy and so endlessly welcoming that everyone in power was annoyed to the point of state sanctioned murder? It seems religious and political leaders alike sensed he was influential enough that a revolution might be brewing. He was challenging and questioning the methods of the Roman empire, teaching non-violent dissent. He was challenging and questioning the strict rules of his faith tradition that had drifted from the essence of God's story. In fact, the growing concern gave way to the old proverb, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Let's start with the players in this scene—the Herodians and the Pharisees are working together to trap Jesus, and Matthew reports as much; there is no secret here to motive. What should grab our attention as readers is the alliance being made between these two groups. On one side, we have religious fundamentalists who want to protect the ways of the faith they claim to know so perfectly and the power their guardianship affords them. On the other is a political body, born out of 1st century Judaism, protecting and preserving the ways of Rome amidst the practice of their faith. They share faith roots but have divergent priorities and agendas, yet they are willing to work together to advance their own agendas because they agree that Jesus is now a threat to their ways of life. This story is ancient but we know it so well! And Jesus quickly recognizes what is happening, sees the power struggle, hears yet again their questions about authority despite his efforts to explain himself through parables. He will not be trapped.

"Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" The question is one of duality—the answer can only be either *this* or *that* but not *both*. Either you pay taxes to the emperor and show allegiance to Caesar or you don't participate in the system and

show your allegiance instead to God. But it can't be both, the Herodians and Pharisees reason. Jesus calls for a coin that would be rather controversial to have in the Temple, but someone produces one easily and readily. Then Jesus asks of it, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" or "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" The answer, of course, is Caesar, and the inscription on the currency of that nation declared him the Son of God. He answers them in a way that doesn't sound baffling to us at all, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." With the passage of time and the way we as church in our time and place have told this story, we have easily separated our loyalties to state and loyalties to religion by effectively making separate compartments for them—give to government, give to church, have a public life and a private life, have a spiritual life and a regular life. Nothing about this sounds confusing to us because this is how we have told the story for years. But Jesus is asking them about image. Jesus is asking them about likeness. Whose image and likeness is on this coin? And the implied question that mirrors the spoken one is, "Whose image and likeness is on you?"

Just as a turn of phrase can prompt a song in one's imagination, for people of faith who tell the story of a hovering, moving God with power to speak worlds into existence, the question of image and likeness immediately draws the mind back to preeminent story—"from the opening chapter of Genesis: 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.' Likeness – *ikon* – is the word used in the Septuagint (Greek translation) of Genesis," notes David Lose, "and is also the word Matthew chooses. So a better translation of v. 20 is likely, 'Whose likeness is this, and what title?'...I suspect those listening closely to Jesus' word choice would have harkened back to God's initial pronouncement and promise: We bear God's likeness and are therefore made to be more than we sometimes realize."¹

Andrew Prior challenges our contemporary telling of this story as he observes, "[I]n the [1st century cultural] mindset, Jesus has given Caesar no authority at all. He has

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/10/pentecost-20-image-likeness-and-identity/>

said the precise opposite of our modern idea that we can pay our taxes and keep our religion private.”²

The real question here is about guiding story. To whom do we belong? As we might say in our own cultural climate today: what is fake news and what is good news? What is the emperor’s and what is God’s? This is not a text about giving to the government what belongs to the government and to the church what belongs to the church. The question here is about your story. The story of this moment, the story that gets told of your entire life, the story that guides you and becomes the one for which you are known. When the pressure is on and your allegiance is begged from all directions, what does it mean to give to God what is God’s?

Clayton Schmit adds, “Take a look at any person. Whose inscription is on him or her? Each is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). There can be no doubt, then, what Jesus means here. Give yourselves to God because it is to [God] that you belong.” It’s not a question we will answer easily today, and the crowds that day were astounded. Sometimes we just sit with the questions for a while. What does it mean to bear the likeness of Caesar? What does it mean to bear the likeness of God? And if we are interested in giving our likenesses to God, what in the world does that look like?

David Lose says Jesus response was particularly brilliant as “Jesus accuses [those who have confronted him] of neither blasphemy nor disloyalty. Rather, he calls them hypocrites, those who have quite literally taken to wearing another, and false, likeness. So perhaps the charge against those trying to entrap or discount Jesus then or now is best understood as amnesia, for they have forgotten who they are, in whose likeness they were made.”

Amnesia, in this sense, can genuinely be a forgetting of true self and guiding story. I suggest our amnesia as people of faith can also be a way of collective denial. To that end, Australian pastor Andrew Prior adds, “To deny the flourishing of all who are human, is to cease to worship God, and to cease loving our neighbour as ourselves. It is to side with government, and with the nation, when it has become

² <https://www.onemansweb.org/theology/the-year-of-matthew-2017/but-everything-belongs-to-god-matthew-2215-22.html>

Caesar-like.”³ To find our likeness in the ways of Caesar is a way of chasing after the illusion of comfort and security and the hope of power. To find our likeness in the ways of God is to believe in the wholeness and flourishing of all things and all people and to participate with great hope in bringing that story to life. When we give our likeness to God’s likeness, we are giving to God what is God’s.

Clayton Schmit contributes to this idea saying, “[W]e give to God that which belongs to God: that is, we give ourselves. We take the sacred trust and invest it in lives of worship. Sometimes, that worship occurs privately, in devotion. Sometimes, in church with our brothers and sisters in Christ. And the rest of the time, it occurs in the sphere of daily work and service. All of this is worship. Ultimately, giving ourselves to God means that we give ourselves to the world.”⁴

And if we’re still wanting for an example of how this likeness might take shape, all we must do is turn our attention the one who was approached by the Pharisees and Herodians that day. It seems the honoring the likeness of God in each one of us will make us less comfortable in the power structures of our society. Honoring the likeness will draw us into community with people who don’t fit in the neat categories all cultures like to create. Honoring the likeness of God in us will compel us to live out a radical love that might well threaten those who are making themselves in the likeness of Caesar. You bear the likeness of God in you. May you remember this is your story. May you come to understand that your life itself is a gift. May you give to God what is God’s.

³ <https://www.onemansweb.org/theology/the-year-of-matthew-2017/but-everything-belongs-to-god-matthew-2215-22.html>

⁴ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1062