

What is God's?
Matthew 22:15-22
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First Central Congregational UCC
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“What does a coin tell us about who we are?” In my reading in preparation for the sermon this week, one commentator asked that question.

American coins have gotten more interesting in the last decade or so. Thomas Jefferson now looks out at you on the nickel, and, rather than just honoring a select few Founding Fathers, Presidents, and buildings, the state quarters showed a wide variety of images of American life. I don't know how you did it here in Nebraska, but in Oklahoma we voted on-line for our favourite image for the Oklahoma quarter. I didn't really care for any of the choices, but the one I voted for did win. I thought one of the oddest selections came from Arkansas. Theirs had a big diamond in the middle. I know Arkansas is the only place you can mine diamonds in the U. S., but it still seemed a funny choice, as if the one thing we should all think of when we think of Arkansas is diamonds. Maybe there is a little propaganda in that.

Our coins do have a lot of writing on them. The nickel identifies Monticello as the building on the reverse. Thinking about that this week, I find it remarkable that a slave-holding plantation remains represented on our coins.

All the coins say “United States of America” and how many cents the coin represents. Then, there are three mottos: Liberty, E Pluribus Unum, and In God We Trust. Yes, we do use our coins to convey messages about who we are – or at least what we idealize as a people. I'm a big fan of the E Pluribus Unum, the original motto of the United States, “out of many one.” It conveys our hope for unity and cooperation arising out of our diversity and pluralism. That's a good motto.

I'm not such a fan of “In God We Trust,” which was reaffirmed by the U. S. Congress this week. That replaced E Pluribus Unum as our official motto in 1956 in the midst of the Red Scare in order to act as propaganda against atheistic communists. As one blog I read this week said pretty accurately, it sounds more like a bumper sticker than a motto for the nation.

But, it is there anyway, on every coin we use, defying the Constitution's claim that there will be no religious tests or establishment of religion. *Sigh.*

Our coins reflect our contradictions as a people, our ideals, and some of our story.

Jesus asked those who were trying to trap him to present to them the coin. First off, we realize that Jesus doesn't carry a denarius on him. Maybe he simply doesn't have one on him at the moment, or maybe he doesn't carry one at all, because for ancient Jews graven images, even those on coins, defied the Ten Commandments and were a form of idolatry. The Pharisees saw the use of this coin in this way. The Herodians, on the other hand, were accomodationists, so presumably one of them was carrying the denarius.

The next notable thing is that they have brought the coin into the Temple. Carrying a

graven image of a pagan god into the Temple was a violation of the religious law. That the coin can be presented for inspection is an affront and reveals the hypocrisy of the one carrying it. Jesus had already won this argument when the coin was held up. He didn't even need to say anything!

The coin produced bore the image of Tiberius and was likely engraved with the words, "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus." This coin makes claims. Its very existence and use in paying tribute to Caesar acknowledges his lordship over the people. It is, therefore, a sign of empire and oppression. The coin also claims divinity for Caesar Augustus and claims that Tiberius is himself the Son of God. He is also Pontifex Maximus, the high priest of the Roman pagan religion. This coin is not simply currency with which to engage in financial exchanges – it is an act of propaganda, making theological claims on behalf of the regime. To use it was to participate in those theological claims.

You would expect, then, that Jesus would denounce the coin and the tax. But he does not directly do that. He says, "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's."

Jesus doesn't get into the issue of the tax. Just a little side note. In this day when Americans are debating what should be taxed and how much and for what purposes, you might be interested to know that it was First Central member Norris Brown who was United States Senator from Nebraska from 1907 to 1913, a Republican, who proposed the income tax which was later ratified as the 16th amendment to the Constitution.

But, as I said, Jesus, in this conversation, wasn't primarily concerned with the tax issue, but instead focused on the theological claims of the coin. The church father Tertullian proposed the interpretation of Jesus' statement which has lasted through the millennia. The coin belongs to Caesar because it is stamped with his image. What belongs to God is anything stamped with the image of God.

Which then compels us to ask the question I've listed as my title today, "What is God's?" What is stamped with God's image?

Lutheran pastor Mary W. Anderson answers that question for us:

Caesar had imprinted an image on Roman coins, and God has imprinted an image too – on us. All creation bears God's image because God is the Creator of all things including the human man Caesar. When we give to God things that are God's there isn't anything left to give to anyone else. It is all God's!

Jesus is countering the theological propaganda of Rome. They can claim whatever they want, but it isn't really theirs. Caesar can engrave all the coins he wants. They can celebrate his power. They can claim that he is the divine Son of God. But what does any of that matter? It isn't real, because all these things really aren't Caesars. So, send the coins back to him, they are idolatrous anyway!

Unlike Caesar who wants to dominate and oppress us, God wants to share the blessing with us. God wants justice, righteousness, and compassion. Jesus' statement here in Matthew seems to draw on a beautiful passage from Isaiah 49.

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
Break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For the Lord has comforted the people,
And will have compassion on the suffering ones.

But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me."

Can a woman forget her nursing child,
Or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
Yet I will not forget you.
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.

God has tattooed our image upon God's hands. It is a beautiful image of the care and compassion of God. Just as God has shared God's image with us, our image has become part of God. We will not be forgotten. Our suffering will be comforted. We will be saved.

Playing along with Caesar's illusions isn't the real question, Jesus seems to be saying. What is more important is if you are giving to God what belongs to God. Are you acknowledging that all things are marked with God's image? Are you treating every other human being as if she or he bears the image of God, not just Tiberius who claims it exclusively for himself? And, very importantly, are you giving of yourself? Are you living up to the divine image which is in you?

See, you don't need Tiberius to be the Son of God, the high priest for you. Tiberius cannot save you and bring you peace. You are a child of God. You are marked by God, and God has marked God's self with you. This is the good news which will set you free.

According to Bible scholar David Hare, "Jesus is not saying, 'There is a secular realm and there is a religious realm, and equal respect must be paid to each.'"

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas writes, "Jesus is not recommending in his response to the Pharisees that we learn to live with divided loyalties. . . . Just as Jesus knows no distinction between politics and religion, neither does he know any distinction between politics, economics, and the worship of God."

Pastor Anderson again, "Any expectation that life can be neatly divided into pigeonholes of sacred and secular, public and private, doesn't hold true in God's economy. This does not work in a world where everything belongs to God."

Because everything does belong to God and everything that belongs to God must be given to God for God's purposes, we don't get to live our religion in one realm and exclude it from everything else we do. That means that what we believe about God should influence all of who we are and everything we do – our family life, our relationships, our work, our politics, how we use our money.

Stanley Hauerwas says that this means we have a problem. We have a problem of how to be faithful to God while being part of social systems that are controlled by Caesars. Jesus' answer does not solve this problem for us or remove it, it identifies it. Hauerwas writes that if

we aren't struggling with how to be faithful in the world, then we really do have a problem, because we have accommodated ourselves to Caesar.

So, Jesus doesn't give us the Ten Steps for Being Faithful Stewards. Nor can I tell you how to deal with these issues in your own life. Part of the joy of our religious tradition is that each of you have the liberty to decide for yourself, while remaining in covenant with the rest of us.

That said, I can recommend some of the tried and true spiritual practices of the Christian church, because these help to discipline our wants and open us up to the work of God. These practices cultivate generosity in us.

- **Prayer & Meditation** keep us centered in God and not self.
- Through **Financial Stewardship** we are reminded that all we possess is God's bountiful gift of blessing and that we are expected to share that blessing with others.
- **Simplicity** helps, as God knows that we must live within a human economy that is filled with injustice. God does not ask us to exist outside this economy. Rather, all that God asks is that we set aside 10% of our resources from the human economy in order to bear witness to the reign of God.
- **Fasting** is the discipline of electing to go without something, even a luxury or a convenience, in order to devote to others the time, energy, or resources spent on what is given up.
- **Playfulness**, humour, fun, and fellowship with one another are sure measures to keep us focused on hope.

These practices will help to guide us in faithful living, in giving to God what is God's.

Though I may not like it as a motto for the government of the United States of America, "In God We Trust" does express how we can live our lives with justice, righteousness, and compassion. Because if we trust God to provide for us, to remember us, then we will be free to give, to share our blessings with others. Isaiah has reminded us that we can trust God, because God will not forget us. God has engraved our image on the palms of God's hands. Therefore, we should not fear. We can rejoice. And we can give to God what is God's – all that we have, including our very selves.