

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer; Amen.

One day an antique dealer spotted a valuable antique bowl in a hardware store. Although it was worth thousands of dollars, it was being used to feed the owner's cat. Not wanting to alert the owner to its value, the clever dealer said, 'I'd like to buy your cat. I'll give you twenty dollars for him.' The owner resisted until the dealer offered \$100 at which point he sold the cat. The dealer then said, 'I assume I'll get the bowl to go with the cat so that I can feed him when I get home?' The owner replied 'Oh no, that's my lucky bowl. I've sold 34 cats with it this week!'

It's a trap! That was true for the antique dealer and it's true for Jesus. Today in our Gospel lesson we find Jesus trapped between the Herodians and the Pharisees. These are normally people who aren't spotted together. The Herodians get their authority from Rome. They represent power and oppression. The Pharisees on the other hand tended to align themselves with the oppressed, the commoners, the very people who the Herodians lorded over. And yet in our story today we have the two groups coming together to try and trap this particular Rabbi. It seems as though they have declared a temporary truce with a common purpose, getting rid of this Jesus guy who is stirring up trouble in both of their worlds.

They ask Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" If Jesus were to answer "yes" the crowds who just welcomed him triumphantly into Jerusalem just earlier this week, they would turn against him. If he answers "no" then he positions himself as more powerful than the Romans and they will have enough on him to arrest him for defiance and speaking out against the emperor. So what is Jesus choice? If you were him what would you do? Would you side with the Pharisees and speak out on behalf of your neighbors and risk Roman coming after you? Or would you side with the power and risk the crowds revolting? Neither seems like a good option.

You know I think there is even more to this story than what meets the eye. Romans think of Caesar as divine. They think of him as a god that is in control of their world, of everything, especially of their money. And as we all know, money is power. And if that is all true, if they put their trust in Caesar above all else, that makes Caesar their god. And that makes Caesar's face on their coin a graven image. Which means that any Jew holding the coin is breaking both the first and second commandment since they were not allowed by law to have any graven images, thus the money changers in the temple. Is it all starting to come together and make sense for you? Perhaps it's Jesus that is trapping the Herodians and the Pharisees, trapping them at their own games.

As I was thinking about this graven image business of our other little g "gods," I can't help but think about the book of Genesis. I am reminded that we, each one of us, are created in God's likeness, "imageo dei", in his image. In Matthew this morning he chooses to use the same word, "likeness", that is used in the book of Genesis. If we look at verse twenty it is better translated as "Whose likeness is this, and what title?" He's asking this community, were you created in the likeness of Caesar? If so, then act like Caesar, desire the same things as Caesar. But this religious community knew better. They were very aware of whose likeness they were created in, and that likeness has absolutely nothing to do with Caesar. It was as if Jesus was smacking them on their wrists and saying wake up! Get it together! Focus! Because at the end of the day, even Caesar was created in God's image.

What does it mean for us to bear God's likeness to the world? Does it mean that we get distracted by things that have nothing to do with God? Does it mean that we get caught up in the political arena and monitor every tweet and every facebook post waiting to pounce on its author? Does it mean that we are so focused on the behavior of our neighbor that we forget to monitor

our own behavior? Does it mean that we allow guns or flags or people to become our god? No, of course not. So, what DOES it mean it mean for us, as Jesus' followers to bear God's likeness?

In New York City there is a young barber named Mark Bustos who spends his free time cutting hair for the homeless knowing that he will never make a cent. There is a woman named Lillian who is 99 years old who sews a dress a day for girls who are in need. In Indiana someone captured a picture of a police officer giving the boots right off of his feet to a homeless man on the side of the road. In Montana there is a young college student who started a "You deserve a flower project". For his project he hands out fresh cut flowers to women on the street to try and improve their days just because. In Vancouver, Canada there is a young boy who started a lunch bag movement. Each day he takes bagged lunches and hands them out to homeless people on the street to make sure that they have something to eat.

Each of these people, in their own way has discovered a way to spend their lives living in the likeness of God. They are loving and serving others without an interest in self-gain. We serve a God who creates, sustains, nurtures and redeems us no matter what the cost is. It's a God who is always looking out for us, whether we make good choices or bad choices, whether we choose him or others. A God who wants everyone to have enough...enough food, enough shelter, enough money, enough love. It's a God who isn't afraid to give us everything he has to give. No, he didn't even spare his very own son. He's generous and merciful and loving and kind and patient, and always, always, always looking out for someone besides himself.

I think the thing I hear most often from non-Christians about Christians is that we are hypocrites. We hear God's word, but we act in a way that brings us self-gain, instead of keeping our attention outward, on the world, our communities and our neighbors. In our story for this morning Jesus calls the Herodians and Pharisees "hypocrites" and what he's actually saying is

this, “you are in a false likeness of your creator”. You do not belong to Caesar! You belong to God! How quickly you forget! Remember whose you are.

I think our world has forgotten whose we are. We have forgotten that everything that we have down to the coin in our pocket, the breath in our body, the family that surrounds us belongs to God. These things are God’s gift to us. They were given to us not to store up to see who has the most, not to squander so that we have nothing, but they were given to us for us to steward, for us to use wisely for ourselves, our families, but also for the care of the world. If we spend our lives in the likeness of God, then we spend our lives reflecting the things that God is about, not what the world wants us to be about. And that is exactly what Jesus is reminding us we are supposed to be doing this morning.

In our baptisms God claimed us and reminded us that we are made in his image. Today Jesus is reminding us to live like it, to act like it, to look like that image. Today Jesus is reminding us to show the world the claim that God has over us, to look outward and care for the world and those in it, to stop thinking of ourselves and the things the world tells us that we should obsess about. My prayer for us this morning, as we enter into a very busy and secular driven part of the calendar year that we would keep our focus on God and the things that he is about. And that we truly would be the light that shines in the darkness Amen.