

## **Whose Image Is This?**

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church  
in Fremont, California,  
on October 8, 2017, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.  
Scripture: Genesis 1:26-31a and Matthew 22:15-22;  
“The Generous Way of Jesus” Pledge Campaign  
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If this were an ordinary Sunday, this is the kind of week I would have abandoned whatever I had planned to preach on and take the opportunity to respond theologically and pastorally to the events of last Sunday night. We are in the middle of our pledge campaign, and have planned a sermon series on stewardship, and I feel compelled to continue that series rather than stepping out of it. And yet... this latest massacre is so horrific, I felt that I had to address it from the pulpit, if only for a few minutes.

I found that, as I worked on my sermon and pondered what to say about the shooting in Las Vegas, the few words at the beginning of my sermon kept growing longer and longer and kept turning into the beginning of a whole sermon. So I think I will offer you this, from the Rev. John Dorhauer, our UCC General Minister and President, who summed up so well my own feelings and my own prayer in the wake of this event:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CG\\_PHI2vpII](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CG_PHI2vpII)

Last week, Pastor Jeff began our sermon series on the Generous Way of Jesus, with the parable of the wedding banquet. He talked about the parable being an invitation to become part of the social transformation that is the Realm of God. How we choose to use our financial resources is one way that we respond to that invitation.

Our text today continues that exploration of social transformation. It has a pretty famous line that even people who haven't grown up in the church usually have heard, and that is in verse 21 towards the end of the passage: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.” Or perhaps more people have heard the King James version of the verse: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's.”

The tax that is referred to in this passage is most likely the census tax, which the empire began in year six of the common era. The census was a way for the empire to find out how many people lived in a particular occupied area and raise the resources needed to govern. It was basically a way for the occupied peoples of the empire to pay for their own oppression. It was a tax that was part of the massive tax burden of the people in Jesus's time, and the source of debate and controversy among the various Jewish political factions in Jerusalem.

This text has traditionally been used to talk about both taxes and the larger matter of the relationship between God and the reigning political authorities. The text encourages us to ponder important questions, such as, should Christians pay taxes to governments? Should they pay only those taxes that support social programs, but refuse to support things like military spending or state-sanctioned violence? Should churches be tax-exempt? Does God authorize obedience to

governments? These are all important questions... but they will have to wait for another day, because I'm not going to talk about paying taxes in our current context.

I am going to talk about paying taxes in the first century Jewish context, and what Jesus's response to the question about paying taxes has to do with us and with our understanding of stewardship.

In order to more fully understand this passage and its meaning, it helps to understand that the Judaism of Jesus's time was not monolithic. There were a variety of Jewish political factions in existence in the time of Jesus, and each of them had a different response to the occupation of the Roman Empire, and a different understanding of what it meant to be good stewards of one's resources.<sup>1</sup>

At one end of the political spectrum were the Sadducees and the priests. The Sadducees not only cooperated with the occupying forces of Rome, they also sought to personally profit from their economics dealings with the Empire. Even after the destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem—which would have occurred before the Gospel according to Matthew was written—some Sadducees continued to try to seek personal financial advantage by cooperating with the Empire.

For the Sadducees, stewardship meant using one's resources to provide for one's own security and to maintain economically advantageous relationships with the ruling power that allowed them to prosper. They were proponents of a sort of first-century version of the Prosperity Gospel.

At the other end of the political spectrum were the Zealots. The Zealots were revolutionaries who sought to use violence and destruction to overthrow the Empire and restore Jerusalem to its own sovereign rule. They believed that if they could start an armed rebellion against the Empire, that God would join them and it would be a Holy War. For the Zealots, stewardship meant using one's resources to stock the war chest and battle Rome by any means necessary.

Also present somewhere in the middle of the political spectrum were apocalyptic groups with an end-time theology. These groups believed that the present age was broken and corrupt, and that God would interrupt this age with an apocalypse—a historical and cosmic cataclysm—and replace this present world with a new one that was ruled by God. These groups saw the Roman Empire as part of the brokenness of the present age. Rather than believing that the empire could be overthrown, like the Zealots, they believed that God would do the overthrowing, and that their role was to alert others to the coming apocalypse. For end-times groups, stewardship meant using one's resources to maintain the vitality of the community, to witness to the coming Realm of God, and to invite others to repent.

Finally, the Pharisees were also somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. They recognized the injustice and oppression of Rome, but also admitted to the inevitability of living within the Empire. Their approach to dealing with occupation was to maintain the community's Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> The ideas in the section that follows is based on the exegetical support materials from Bruce Barkhauer, et. al., in *Journey to Generosity: The Way of Jesus*, published by the Center for Faith and Giving in 2016 and downloaded in 2017, 97-99.

identity, centered in studying and following the law and the Torah, and to live as peacefully as possible within the Empire. For the Pharisees, stewardship meant using resources to create communities grounded in covenantal living through the Torah.

As an aside—but an important one—Matthew’s gospel tends to deal harshly with the Pharisees. In our text today, the Pharisees are trying to trick Jesus with their question about paying taxes, and later in the gospel Jesus will call them hypocrites. But it is important to remember that descendants of the Pharisees were the rabbinic movement that saved Judaism after the destruction of the temple. After the Zealots fought the war that totally destroyed Jerusalem, it was the successors of the Pharisees who constructed a new Judaism based on study of the Torah, rather than worship in the temple. It’s one of the great shameful realities of our faith that centuries of Christians have used Matthew’s struggle with the Pharisees as a basis for anti-Semitism; understood in context, that struggle was more a sibling rivalry than a war.

The community for whom Matthew’s gospel was written were Jewish followers of Jesus, with an apocalyptic core—they believed that the Realm of God was imminent—but they had a Pharisaic spirit and believed in building the covenantal community. Just as we might disagree theologically with the other churches down the street, Matthew’s community disagrees with the synagogues down the street, who challenged the Jewish identity of Matthew’s community members.

These Pharisees attempt to trip Jesus up with their questions about taxes. “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” they ask. “If Jesus answer[s] ‘No,’ then Jesus could be arrested by the Romans for non-payment of the tax and for threatening the peace of the Empire (sedition). If Jesus answer[s] ‘Yes,’ then Jesus would lose credibility in the eyes of those who sought to resist Rome. They would perceive Jesus as being complicit with the Empire.”<sup>2</sup>

Then Jesus does something remarkable; he plots a third way between the two extremes that manages to criticize both Rome and self-serving cooperation with Rome without appearing to call for sedition. He asks to see the coin used to pay the tax—a denarius, worth about a day’s wages in the first century. The coin had a profile portrait of the emperor with an inscription of his title: “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest.” When Jesus asks, “Whose head is this, and whose title,” the word that the New Revised Standard Version translates as “head” is the Greek word *eikōn*, which is more accurately rendered as “image.”

When Jesus uses the word “image,” he is calling his listeners to remember the great poem of creation in Genesis. According to Genesis 1, which Mark read from earlier, “God made human beings in the image of God. [...] To be made in the image of God is to be able to do in our limited human spheres what God does in the cosmic sphere. [...] to create [...] a community of mutual support in which all things work together for the good of all, [...] each element of creation [serving] the larger purposes of covenantal community.”<sup>3</sup>

For Jesus, stewardship means using resources in a way that allows us to live into the image of God, to live together in mutual support, in Covenantal relationship with God and all creation. For

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 102

the listeners of Matthew's gospel, Jesus encourages them that this covenantal community—the Realm of God—is already underway. He bests the Pharisees who seek to trap him because his comment about the image on the coin subversively points out the idolatry of the Roman Empire while calling his community to remember their birthright as God's image-bearers.

There are some important differences between our community and Matthew's. One is that Matthew's followers believed that the apocalypse was imminent; one of the purposes of Matthew's gospel was to prepare its followers for that event. The other great difference is that Matthew's community "did not believe that the work of the church would have a socially transforming effect."<sup>4</sup>

I'll hazard a guess that most of us in this room do not believe that the apocalypse will happen any day now. Personally, I think that if the end is near, it will be an end of our own making, not God's. And I'll guess that most of us here do believe that the church is a vital part of the social transformation needed that will bring about the Realm of God—or what Martin Luther King Jr. called the Beloved Community.

Still, the message of stewardship in Matthew calls to us today. Jesus calls us to be image bearers of God. He calls us to use our resources to restore creation to the mutual community of support that God crafted at the beginning of creation. How will we respond to that call? Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 103.