

WHAT IS GOD'S? Reflection for 18 October 2020

Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; I Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

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“Mom,” her inflection echoed the sparkle in her eyes, “Mom, you HAVE to listen to the words of this song!” I dried my hands, dropped onto her bed and listened, wincing at the sexist pronouns.

If God had a name, what would it be? And would you call it to his face,
if you were faced with him in all his glory?
What would you ask if you had just one question?

Yeah, yeah, God is great. Yeah, yeah, God is good.
What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us?
Just a stranger on the bus, trying to make his way home?

If God had a face, what would it look like? And would you want to see,
if seeing meant that you would have to believe,
in things like heaven and in Jesus and the saints, and all the prophets?

Remember that one? The year was 1995 and Joan Osborne's song, "One of Us" was at the top of the pop music charts, indicating some pretty powerful yearning in our culture, to see the face of God. Keira is now 40, and the memory is still relevant.

Our Hebrew scripture today tells us that Moses was "up close and personal" with God. What touches me is the incredibly intimate nature of the relationship. They obviously trust each other: Moses dares to argue, to push God, trusting that it is safe to do so; God trusts Moses enough to grant his requests, even to the point of revealing God's self, or as much of it as any human can bear to see.

How would we react to an opportunity to be with God on such an intimate level? What would we want to ask? If the whole scenario feels too far-fetched for you to imagine, ask another question: "What are we staring at so intently that we do NOT see the face of God? What is blocking our VIEW of the face of God?"

Is it our own Golden Calf idols of money, clothes, cars, houses, entertainment, sports, travel? Could it be that we're afraid of what real intimacy with God might mean?

What if we could see God every day, just by opening our eyes? Looking for the good in situations and in people, instead of the negative, by recognizing what belongs to God? What if every time we looked in the mirror, we smiled at the realization that we are seeing a reflection of God's image?

Interesting that when we get to the trick question in today's **Gospel** reading, Jesus answers—as is typical for him—with a related question: "**Whose face do you see?**"

This week's gospel reading presents one of the five head-on collisions Jesus had with the religious authorities.¹ But this one is not about anything as abstractly theological as the possibility of resurrection or the coming of the Lord's anointed. This confrontation is about something **really serious**: TAXES!

Jesus is being set up. It was the kind of question that gets a person in trouble, no matter how they answer it.

The Pharisees pose a question to which they think there is no "safe" answer for Jesus: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? If he says no to taxes, they will go to the authorities accusing Jesus of anti-government activity. If he says "yes" to the tax, Jesus will lose face with the people, who hated the Romans, and who also believed that true tribute belonged only to God.

Can you see the headlines in the daily papers the next day??

RELIGIOUS RULERS INTERROGATE GALILEAN RABBI

(Court of the Temple. Tuesday, April 4, A. D. 30.)

“So, show me a coin!” He responded.

Part of the power of Jesus' preaching in parables was his refusal to use just words when pictures would do. Instead of launching into a lengthy lecture on social responsibilities, civil tax structures or religious freedom, Jesus simply calls for a prop.

“So, show me a coin!”

Notice, he doesn't have one in the folds of his own garment. For the Jewish religious leaders to possess such a coin bearing Caesar's image indicated that they were breaking their own law.

“Hypocrites!” He called them. And Jesus does not touch the coin himself.

Remember the story of Jesus being angry about the money changing in the Temple? All Roman coins had to be exchanged by the temple moneychangers to special Temple coins because no graven images of any kind were allowed within the temple.²

In Matthew's story, Jesus is still inside the temple, talking with the leaders. Inside the temple, no Roman coins are to be in use; they are to be exchanged for the Syrian shekel. So the fact that the leaders can bring out a denarius inside the temple is significant.

The reason these coins are forbidden is obvious once you get a good look at one. The denarius in question shows a picture of Tiberius as a god, in the pose and dress of a god. There is an inscription that reads, "divi f."³ which stands for "Son of God." This refers to the claim to divinity of the whole Julian line of emperors. Roman theology said that Julius Caesar ascended to the heavens as a god, and so all of his successors, adopted sons, are also gods. And godlike they were to the people of the empire. They put an end to years of bloody civil war. They brought in luxuries like clean drinking water. They were truly miracle workers to many people and sincerely worshiped as gods in their pantheon.

So the coin represents the claims of an entirely different theology, more than simply money. While not allowed in the temple, the denarius is the currency required for the payment of taxes.

“Whose picture is on it? What is written on the coin?” Jesus inquires.

Jesus has shown that their question is not his problem, but that it is not a serious problem for those who ask the question either; they have long since answered the question in the affirmative. They not only pay taxes, they conduct business in the currency of the realm.

Now, Jesus is free to redirect this whole line of questioning. Jesus asks that his questioners be concerned with nothing less than a right understanding of their relationship to God. Outsmarted, outclassed and out of ideas, the Pharisees' designated henchmen slink away.

This is one of the most famous of all anecdotes told about Jesus. It lends itself to being used to justify separation of the affairs of religion and the affairs of commerce and government. "This is why the church ought not to be involved in anything that has to do with politics," some say.

Matthew would have been astonished at such an interpretation. He has just been giving a theological commentary on social and political events which had rocked his community, the sacking of Jerusalem. It was almost impossible to separate politics and religion in Israel, because their Holy Scripture sanctioned national interest and national institutions, not least the temple system.

This was why the question made sense, mischievous as it was. What do you do about Rome, the pagan power, which now controlled the Promised Land? Do you pay taxes to such a regime? Does that not sanction the power? Withholding taxes was one of the ploys advocated by devout rebels of the day. What is a person to do? What were Christians in Nazi Germany to do? It is a question I faced, paying taxes in the U.S. to support a military budget my faith stance could not support.

But Jesus' response does not advocate withholding taxes. He is prepared to pay taxes that promote the common good and gives permission to his followers to do so when appropriate.

So, let's avoid using this text to depict a dichotomy of relationships between church and state. That also clues us into the consideration of dividing reality into God's area and other areas. The transforming love of God can also affect our relationships, our budgets, our planning; our family, our congregation, our community and world! As Christians, we invest ourselves in **TO** the world, maybe even using the things of Caesar, but certainly the things that are God's, for godly purposes.

And that, my friends, is what makes Jesus' reply profoundly subversive. If everything is God's, then in all things I will seek God's way. That will entail measuring all things, including governments, by the vision Jesus gave us of God's rule or the Kin-dom or Shalem, whatever you choose to call that vision. God's compassion knows no bounds, so it will always be an irritant to systems which stifle it and it will stand in conflict with oppressors and temptors, whoever and wherever they are.

If Jesus were asked the same question today, he'd face an even trickier situation. If current levels of giving of time, talents, and money to the church that professes to follow him are any indication, and if our constant complaints about taxes are any indication, we don't believe in paying tribute to either God or Caesar. It's **OURS**. And we have worked **hard for** it!

At a church where I worshipped some time ago, the minister thanked the people responsible for the tasteful thanksgiving decorations, both inside the church and at the outside entrances. Then he waxed eloquent about the

gorgeous gardens still blooming around the church, credit for which he gave both to God and to one woman, in particular, who had spent hours on the gardening. At that point, her husband quipped, “Yeah, but you should have seen it when God had it alone.”

That is an old joke, frequently told to demonstrate the significance of our being co-creators with God, or at least stewards of what God has given. But the emphasis here seemed to be on what the gardener had accomplished.

Yes, we DO work hard! Sometimes SO hard that we forget our relationship with God, we forget that we ourselves belong to God. We think everything rides on our shoulders. We forget that in the Creation story, God modelled a weekly sabbath, a mini Jubilee, for us to imitate. We forget that, made in God’s image, we too would benefit from such a rest. If we give ourselves wholly back to God, we might remember that! And then everything else would fall into focus, into perspective.

With his answer, it seems that Jesus wanted to wake people up to the possibility that there was so much more available to them—more love, more joy, more justice, more resources—through a right relationship with God. Discerning “what is God’s” is a radical mandate for a re-evaluated life and a renewed creation. And a timely consideration for a congregation in transition.

We are made in the image of God, for intimate relationship with God, so WE are part of the equation of “what belongs to God.” One contrast in this encounter of Jesus with the Pharisees and Herodians is between the realm of Caesar and the Realm of God, but another contrast is between the coin with Caesar’s image on it and ourselves with God’s image on us. “What” belongs to God becomes a “WHO.”

What or WHO is God’s? **WE** are! What we are to “render unto God” is our whole lives! It is as though Jesus said: YOU are the coin of God’s Realm. And all you do and all you have! All the time.

It seems that a certain little girl had reached school age, and her father worked intently to enthuse her about the idea of school—bought her new clothes, told her about the other children she would meet, got her so excited about the project that she eagerly went off on the first day, and came home with excellent reports of what school was like. Well, the next morning, the dad went into the bedroom and told her it was time to get up. His daughter said, “What for?” Dad replied, “It’s time to get ready for school.” The girl said, “**What, again?**”

And like that little girl, our understanding that we belong to God is not just a one-time realization, it is a lifestyle, like the lifestyle that Paul commends the Thessalonians for in today’s epistle lesson.

We are called to a lifestyle that recognizes that our “all,” our “everything,” belongs to God. Now, there’s an interesting take on Jesus’ reply. The Shema says to love the Lord your God with ‘your everything’ (a Hebrew word difficult to translate correspondingly into English.) Every Jew would know that. We followers of the Jewish Jesus might not.

There is a story about a nine-year old boy who went to church for the first time. To the little boy who had never been to church, the church looked really big. At one point in the service, these tall unhappy-looking people walked down to the front and picked up some shiny brass plates. The boy watched with utter fascination, as they walked up and down the aisles. Then they got close enough that the boy could see people putting money into the plates. All of a sudden, it hit the bright nine year old that these people must be giving money to God.

He knew he didn't have a thing in his pockets to give God. By this time the offering plate was being passed down his aisle and, feeling desperate, he just grabbed the plate and held on to it. People started to look askance at him. He finally let go and watched it pass on down the aisle. He turned to see it passed down the aisle behind him. And then his eyes remained glued on the plate as it was passed back and forth, back and forth all the way to the rear of the sanctuary.

Then he had an idea. This little boy got up out of his seat. He walked about eight rows back, grabbed the usher by the coat and asked to hold the plate one more time. Then he did the most astounding thing. He took the plate, set it on the carpeted church floor and stepped into the center of it. As he stood there, he lifted his head up and said, "God, I don't have anything to give you today, but **just me. I give you me!**"

The picture of that little boy standing in the plate raises yet another question for us: How do **WE** give **ourselves**? That little boy made a choice. We make choices all the time—choices about what we do with our time, our talents, our treasure, our lives. The choices that we make about what we do with money is an important part of our life of faith. Not that it is the only way, but it is important to recognize that money enables ministry to happen. Think of your offering as minted self. It allows us to be partners with God to do things we could not do otherwise.

Money allows us to be **part of the action of our own congregation and the wider church in a meaningful way**. The church is my greatest ally. Through its ministries, I can help make our world a better place. The church lifts up attitudes, ideals, and values that promote peace and justice. The church is committed to alleviating suffering caused by lack of health and opportunity.

The United Church of Canada has been in the business of working toward such ends for 95 years. Through the Mission and Service Fund, I have a way to express my support for the whole United Church as one of the world's constructive forces for good. Through it, I express my opposition to the destructive forces of evil that make life miserable for the poor and the hungry. That is integral to my value system.

And giving my offering—whether it goes to local or global ministries—is **one** way that I can say thanks to God, because I sure have a lot to give thanks to God for!

Our relationship with money is sometimes an awkward thing to talk about. As Christians, we just cannot dismiss money questions, though, because we follow One who considered it a pretty important topic! Jesus wouldn't have devoted nearly half of his teaching time to money, wealth and property if they were non-issues. Every dimension of our attitude toward money—how we earn it, how we spend it, how we share it, how we invest it, how we value its claim on our hearts—reveals our perception of **what is God's**.

Perhaps you have heard the story of the man who went into a run-down section of an inner city on business. He left his new car parked at the curb. When he came out of the building, a small boy was gazing at his car with wonder in his eyes. The man asked, "Do you like my car?" The boy replied, "I sure do! Mister, I think that is the most beautiful car I have ever seen." The two stood in a few moments of appreciative silence. Then the man said, "My brother gave me that car." "Wow," said the kid. Then he asked, "Ya know what I wish, mister?" The man was sure he would hear that the kid wished he had a brother like that, but politely asked, "No, what do you wish?" The boy replied, "I wish I could BE a brother like that!"

How can we BE a brother or sister like that?! It has a lot to do with giving to God **what is God's!**

If we are here on the Lord's Day to encounter the One we love with all our being, we'll also take the next step. We will ask how we can give ourselves to that One without reservation; how we who are made in God's image can totally offer ourselves to God by living in God's ways.

And if we can ask that question, we'll have taken the first step on the road to make this congregation truly live into our future. Who are we? People made in God's image. Who are our neighbours? People made in God's image. We will talk much more concretely about those two questions in an upcoming congregational event on Zoom. From our reflection, we will discern how we are being invited by God to live for God in our community.

May we open ourselves to that life to fill our lives to discover the absolute wonder of belonging heart, mind, and soul to the One in Whose image we are made.

¹ The first was in Matthew 21:23, where the chief priests and elders challenged Jesus' authority to teach and heal. Immediately after today's story, there is a confrontation over the rising of the dead (22:23-33), the most important commandment (22:34-40), and the identity of the Messiah (22:41-46).

² To this day, observant Jews do not take money with them to worship. Synagogues are supported by dues which are handled outside the whole context of worship.

³ Divi filius is a Latin phrase meaning "divine son" ("son of a god"), and was a title much used by the Emperor Augustus, the grand-nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divi_filius accessed on 16 October 2020.