

In God We Trust

King of Glory Lutheran Church
Pentecost 20: Year A: Matthew 22:15-22
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Our coins have graven images on them. But in God we trust. Especially in an election year, we might be tempted to begin to bow down to false graven images, trusting them more than we trust God. It is from God all blessings flow. In that spirit, then we trust and can be generous.

Matthew 22:15-22 ¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” ²¹They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

God is amazing! Who knew on the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, two weekends into a church generosity appeal and a mere two weeks away from a presidential election, God would give us this text! This text is a made for church movie, (clears throat) rather sermon, don’t you think? Listener discretion advised: the preacher will be talking politics, religion and money so everyone can be equally offended.

Jesus says, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.” Score! 1 Vote Jesus – 0 Votes Pharisees and Herodians.

They were trying to trap him in his answer. Just like on the debates; phrase the question this way and let’s see what happens. Then both candidates skirt the issue, talking about what they really want to say and someone inevitably says, “Just answer the question.”

Just answer the question, Jesus. “Is it lawful to pay the tax to the emperor or not?”

Now remember this is the tax that funds the Roman occupation of the Jews. If Jesus answers yes, - it is lawful to pay the tax - then His fellow Jews who are living under occupation and long for Messianic freedom will fall away. If Jesus answers no, one ought not pay the tax, then they could hand Him over to Pontius Pilate and bring charges against him. Anyone who tells you the Bible isn’t political has Caribbean beach front property to sell as well.

But Jesus knows His audience. He knows Roman law, and He also knows Jewish law. “Show me the coin!”

“Hmm, argh, humph. Well.....ok, Jesus.”

They bring a denarius; a common coin in that time. But the coin isn't plain. It is inscribed with something on it. Ceasar's face. Now Ceasar's title is emperor and in the Roman world that meant god. Ceasar was divine.

For Romans, they didn't care if Ceasar's face was inscribed on coins or statues or anywhere else. They didn't follow the Ten Commandments. But Jews did. For a Jew any engraved image is an idol. Idols and the God of Abraham are mutually exclusive. To have a coin with Ceasar's face on it within the Temple boundaries convicted the Pharisees of the commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me."

Jesus has led the debate right into the middle of what you and I carry in our wallets each day. Graven images are dead images. They are idols and you melt them down and there is nothing left but a pile of metal, plastic, or ashes. We don't worship idols. We worship God. But how could we ever depict an image of God on a coin that everyone would recognize?

As my friend Anna Carter Florence says, 'What would it be like if every time I opened my purse to buy groceries, a handful of those little silver God-heads stared up at me, clinking and winking in the light? (Your total comes to twelve Jehovahs and sixty-nine El Shaddais, ma'am. Paper or plastic?)' (Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence. Publ. 2016. Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. Pg 130.)

How could we engrave God? The minute we do, that image becomes an idol. Christians don't worship idols, we worship God.

Yet, during an election season, plenty of graven images abound! Think about all the t-shirts, yard signs, the stickers with photos of candidates. What becomes tempting is to put all our trust into that particular person. Believing one person can fix all our problems is dangerously close to idol worship. That's a sin.

It's the not the t-shirt itself or the sticker. It is what our hearts and minds do when we see those things. Our United States coins and bills certainly have graven images on them. Washington and Lincoln look at us with the wisdom of their years. Yet our founding fathers built this country knowing they walked into the future with Divine wisdom. God was with them. Because there is no image for God, our money has words instead. "In God we trust" – right there on the greenbacks and the coins. In God we trust. Period. Alleluia.

Remember the old doxology? Praise God, from whom all blessings flow, praise God, all creatures here below; ... (Evangelical Lutheran Worship #885) It is God who grants us all our blessings; our material wealth and our emotional, spiritual wealth. God gives us everything we have and need. This is most certainly true! Therefore as we trust in God who gives bountifully, then we can also share generously. Because we believe God will provide for us again and again and again.

A member of another church once told his story in a temple talk. It was customary for he and his wife to go to brunch after worship. As usual, they enjoyed their meal. When he went to the register to pay, he looked again at his bill. Suddenly he realized, he was paying more for his lunch, than he had just put into the offering plate at church. This Christian man, became conscious that his priorities needed some re-ordering.

This year at King of Glory we are asking you to trust in God and trust the Leadership Team to steward your gifts faithfully. By now you've seen the first initiative about efforts to continue getting worship into every house through live-streaming of worship. We need high-speed internet so we can have an improved phone system and zoom classes won't be interrupted by weak signals.

But more than that, in asking you to look at your pledge for 2021, we're asking you to continue vital ministries. Ministries that teach all of us; young or old to trust God rather than idols. The ministry of worship during the pandemic and beyond. Ministry to our home-centered members so that we are all connected.

Will you, look at the chart you received in the mail this week. Locate yourself on the chart by what you give. Pray about the question posted there. "How does my giving level compare with the other ways I use my money?"

Is there anything in our life that has become an idol? Anything we spend more time thinking about or focused on, than we do God? The commandment holds true for us; you shall have no other gods.

If there is something which comes to mind, confess and trust in God's forgiveness. It is there for all to receive. Jesus' words hold true. Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's. Amen.