

The Church of the Holy Apostles
The Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost
Matthew 22:15-22

Coins of God

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Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, I always looked forward to our elementary school field trips. There was one trip in particular that I really loved – and still remember to this day. And that was a visit to the Old San Francisco Mint, where coins were made for over a century.

The Old Mint was founded in the mid-nineteenth century, following the California Gold Rush. It was one of the few buildings to survive the Great Earthquake and Fire of 1906, and it continued to operate as a regular branch of the United States Mint until the 1970s.

I remember being fascinated by the various exhibits at the Old Mint about how coins were made – from the creation of the designs, to the sculpting of the coin dies, to the stamping of the images upon what are known as coin “blanks.”

Now I never did get into numismatics, which is the fancy word for the study of coins. Nor did I ever become a numismatist, or a coin collector. But I am glad that I learned from an early age about a process that most people rarely ever think about.

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Today’s reading from St. Matthew’s gospel focuses on a coin – the Roman denarius – as well as the image of the emperor that was stamped on that coin.

The passage begins with the religious leaders of Jesus’ day trying to entrap Jesus. They ask him a question about paying taxes: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?” (By the way, I was super excited when I realized that I would be preaching on this gospel passage. Prior to my ordination as an Episcopal priest, I practiced as a tax lawyer. But that’s a story for another time.)

Anyway, the question from the religious leaders to Jesus was a trap because he would have gotten into trouble regardless of whether he said “yes” or “no.” If Jesus had said “yes” – that is, it *was* lawful to pay taxes – then his followers would have viewed him as a traitor and a sympathizer to the occupying Roman forces that had colonized the Jewish people. But if Jesus had said “no” – that is, it was *not* lawful to pay taxes – then he and his followers would have been prosecuted by the Roman authorities for violating Roman law.

So what does Jesus do? He cleverly sidesteps the question. Jesus asks the religious leaders to show him a denarius, a coin that was equal to a day’s wages by a worker or a soldier. “Whose head is this, and whose title?” he asks them. “The emperor’s,” they replied. “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” Jesus says. That is, instead of opining upon the lawfulness of Roman taxation, Jesus instructs the people to pay their taxes *and* to give God what is owed to God.

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For many centuries, preachers and theologians have interpreted today's gospel passage from the perspective of church and state relations. The fifteenth-century reformer Martin Luther, for example, cited this passage to support his view that we Christians live simultaneously in two kingdoms – that is, both in a secular realm (headed by the emperor) as well as in a spiritual realm (headed by God). And many of you might have thought about the separation of church and state when you heard this passage.

But I'm not going to go in that direction this morning. In my view, there is much more to this passage than just how we are to interact with the civil and the religious authorities. For me, this passage is important because it teaches us to see the image of God – that is, the *imago Dei* in the Latin – imprinted upon every human being, without exception.

Let me explain. Thinking back to my elementary school field trip to the Old Mint, I believe that each of us can be seen as a blank coin on which an indelible imprint of God's image is stamped. That's how I understand the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, which says that we human beings are created in the "image" and likeness of God. In other words, we are all coins of God!

There's a wonderful fifth-century commentary on St. Matthew's gospel called the *Opus Imperfectum*, or the "Unfinished Work." That commentary looks at today's Gospel text from the perspective of *imago Dei*, and it explains how we are all coins of God – upon which the divine image is imprinted. The commentary says:

The image of God is not depicted on gold but is imaged in humanity. The coin of Caesar is gold; [but the coin] of God [is] humanity. Caesar is seen in his currency; God, however, is known through human beings. . . . God imprints [God's] coins with an impression made neither by hammer nor by chisel but has formed them with [God's] primary divine intention. For Caesar required his image on every coin, but God has chosen [human beings], whom [God] has created, to reflect [God's] glory.

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As a priest of this diocese, I have long admired the Church of the Holy Apostles. In my view, one of the primary gifts – or charisms – of this parish lies in its ability to see the image of God, or the *imago Dei*, imprinted upon absolutely everyone.

Your soup kitchen and pantry is a wonderful example of this perspective. This feeding ministry doesn't just provide sustenance for the body. It also provides spiritual sustenance by treating all guests and visitors as bearing the image of God, regardless of wealth or social status. As such, all guests are welcomed with dignity and without question or qualification.

I believe it is this parish's recognition of the *imago Dei* in everyone that led it to support the gay and lesbian liberation movement in New York City in the 1960s and 1970s. A good friend of mine, Professor Heather White, is a religious historian who has been working on a book project on how Holy Apostles supported the emerging LGBTQ+ community at a time when most churches wouldn't even acknowledge the existence of queer people in their midst – let alone marry or ordain them.

And I don't think it's an accident that The Rev. Dr. Ellen Barrett, the first openly-queer priest in the Episcopal Church – and in the wider Anglican Communion – was ordained at Holy Apostles some 46 years ago, on January 10, 1977.

One of my students at Union Theological Seminary, Caleb, is here today. He is working on a project on the role that Holy Apostles and other local parishes played in Mother Barrett's groundbreaking

ordination. As the *Opus Imperfectum* reminds us, “The image of God is not depicted on gold, but is imaged in humanity.”

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I don’t know about you, but I’ve been struggling deeply for the past two weeks to talk about – or even make sense of – the horrific violence and suffering in Israel and Palestine. This past week was especially hard in light of the bombing of the al-Ali hospital in Gaza, which was run by our friends in the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem. I’ve felt a bit like Moses in today’s Hebrew Bible reading from Exodus. That is, even though I know intellectually that God’s goodness and mercy is always with us, it still feels like God’s face has been hidden from us recently – and that’s been a really hard thing to experience.

While there are no easy solutions in light of the complex historical and political dimensions of the conflict in the Middle East, I do believe that today’s gospel calls us to take seriously the notion of *imago Dei*. Today’s gospel calls us to see the image of God imprinted on *all* people, without exception – as difficult as that might be. Because once we stop seeing the *imago Dei* in the other, that’s when we start sliding towards terrorism, war crimes, and genocide.

What are some stumbling blocks or challenges that have prevented you from seeing the image of God in absolutely everyone? And if you were really honest with yourself, whom do you particularly dislike – or perhaps even hate? And how might the doctrine of *imago Dei* help you to see God’s image in them as well?

Today’s gospel is a reminder that God’s image is imprinted upon all of us, just as Caesar’s image was stamped on the Roman denarius. “[Give] to God the things that are God’s,” Jesus says. May the grace of God help us to see that we are *all* coins of God. And, as such, may the grace of God help us to see that we *all* belong to God. Without exception.