

ICONS

Sermon for Pentecost 19A—Mt 22:15-22

LPC, 10/19/14

You will be glad to know that the estimable Eleanor Walter is hale and hearty and growing daily. She has decided that she will have blue eyes, which means that although she favors both parents in some ways, she really is the image of her mother. If Ellie grows to resemble my lovely daughter-in-law in more than looks she will be well-favored indeed: beautiful, intelligent, graceful, talented, loving and good.

People expect children to look like their parents. The science of genetics means there are good reasons for this expectation. There is less justification for the expectation people sometimes have that children will act like their parents. Perhaps you have heard of the pressure Preachers' Kids or PKs live under. PKs are supposed to be better behaved than other children because their parents are supposedly closer to God. People tend to judge children based on their parents' reputation. People also judge parents on the basis of their children's behavior. If children behave badly, it's often a poor reflection on the parents.

Isn't this what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel lesson from Matthew? On the surface, the answer to that question is no. Jesus is talking about taxation, right? The Pharisees and the Herodians are trying to trip Jesus up by asking him a loaded question: is it lawful for Jews to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor?

If you know anything about the socio-political dynamic of Jews living under Roman rule, this is a peculiar situation. The religiously conservative Pharisees would have found paying taxes to Gentiles problematic, whereas the Herodians were Jews who profited from collaborating with Rome. In other words, these are strange bedfellows. Pharisees and Herodians would have been on opposite sides of this issue. What this means is that, whatever Jesus answers, he's going to be in trouble with somebody. *If* he falls into the trap of actually answering their wickedly conceived question.

Jesus does not answer their wickedly conceived question. Instead, Jesus turns the situation into a teaching moment. He asks for a coin and then asks whose image appears on the coin. When the correct response comes, "the emperor's," Jesus utters this famous dictum: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's." He thereby authorizes civil taxation right?

Jesus nowhere opposes civil taxation, and there is no reason to suppose that he would, but this teaching is not about taxes. It's about godly living. I base that thesis on the use of the word that is translated (badly, I believe) "head," in the NRSV. Jesus asks whose *eikon* appears on the coin. When applied to coins with heads and tails, the word *eikon* can mean head, but to translate it that way loses the double meaning of the word, which outside of coinage terminology is almost always translated "image."

For a Jew like Matthew, the word image would have recalled the creation story from the book of Genesis where God creates humankind in the image of Godself. Humans are *eikons* of God. We are like coins, bearing the *eikon* of our maker and ruler the same way the denarius

bears the *eikon* of the Emperor Tiberius. Just as people looking at a denarius would recognize that that particular coin is the currency of the Roman Empire, people looking at us should be able to recognize the currency of the kingdom of heaven.

Hearing this story, followers of Jesus should ask themselves, when people see me, do they recognize something that belongs to the kingdom of heaven? And if they don't, might they make judgments, as people do, about the God we say we serve?

Evidence is that people are making such judgments, judging the Christian God on the basis of the observed behavior of people calling themselves Christians, the same way people make judgments about the parents of rude children. Respect for Christians among non-Christians seems to be at an all-time low. And the reasons almost certainly have something to do with Christians behaving badly.

Does the way we behave in public give honor to the God we say we serve? Or not?

Surely Jesus would have us consider how we can best reflect our maker and king—how best we can be Christ's *eikon*. Might this be to imitate Christ in Kingdom of God behavior: healing, feeding, standing for justice, forgiving, loving?

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, *eikons* of the saints are used in worship and private devotions. For the Orthodox, *eikons* are more than just pictures. That is one reason they tend not to be purely realistic. For the Orthodox, *eikons* are windows into heaven: glimpses of the kingdom of God.

As *eikons* of Christ, can we be windows into heaven for the rest of the world?

This concept has implications not only for individual behavior but for our relations with other Christians. If we are all *eikons*, heavenly coinage, everybody is worth something. Some of us are pennies, some of us are silver dollars, but we all bear the mark of our maker and king. When we join together we have more power, just as many coins have more buying power when added together than any one coin on its own.

When Jesus says, give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's he is not prescribing some kind of spiritual eeny-meeny-miney-moe, where this part goes here and this part goes there, he's reminding us that Christ's image we are entirely God's.

We humans are good at compartmentalizing, imagining that some parts of our lives are God's and some aren't. If we take from this story that compartmentalization is OK, we will be wrong.

When Jesus says, give to God the things that are God's, he means give everything to God. All that we have, all that we are, all that we hope to be, is God's. I say again, all that we have, all that we are, all that we hope to be, is God's. Which means that whatever we give to God, we are only giving back.