

Sermon for Sunday, October 22, 2017 - "In the Image of God"

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
October 22, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Jesus says, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and give to God the things that are God's." Many think that with these words, Jesus is pointing to a separation between the political/financial realm and the spiritual realm, that he's advising us to give to the powers of the world the worldly things like money and give God our hearts.

The problem with that interpretation is that Jesus, and the rest of scripture, is really clear that everything belongs to God, that God cares a great deal about our political, financial and "worldly" lives.

Jesus isn't offering a simple answer that allows us to separate our faith from our finances and the rest of our lives. Instead, Jesus is challenging the religious leaders, and all of us, to reflect on the things and the images that shape us.

Before we look at the scene with Jesus and the leaders, picture a contemporary encounter that invited reflection. My aunt was shopping at an independent bookstore. She was chatting with the owner about how glad she was to support local bookstores and then she handed the owner her credit card. The look on the owner's face made my aunt cringe as she realized she'd accidentally handed over her Amazon.com credit card.

Oops.

The religious leaders who approach Jesus in the temple have a much more malicious intent, but they have a similarly cringe-worthy encounter with Jesus. They think they can trap him with a question about whether to pay taxes. He says, "Show me the coin used to pay this tax". They hand it over and likely realize, too late, that Jesus has actually trapped them. Jewish law forbids them from bringing a Roman coin into God's temple because it has the image of an emperor who claims to be a deity. The religious leaders know well that the title of deity belongs only to God who is so beyond our images and imaging. Whose image is this, Jesus asks, and whose title?

Oops.

Well, but it is just a coin, what's the big deal?

It's a big deal because, in Jesus' day and now, we are influenced by things, by images, and by the ways we use money.

If you buy a Prius you'll be shaped by that; buying a Hummer will shape you in a very different way. The smartphones so many of us carry profoundly affect how we see ourselves, how we approach the world. The logos of teams, companies, political parties and causes don't just express our loyalties, they also influence them. Companies know this and work to secure our loyalty to their brand. They reward us with

miles, points, and free pizzas after we've bought 10. The public radio tote bag is not just a thoughtful thank you gift.

Marketers know what Jesus knew - our things and our financial choices profoundly influence who we are and how we live. That's why Jesus challenges the religious leaders, and all of us, to reflect on the things we carry and the ways we use our money.

Do our financial choices help us know that all things belong to God and are a gift from God? Do we look for joy, freedom, and security from God or from other things?

As we think about these questions, we need to consider that word "image" again. The most important image we carry is not a brand or a logo but the image of God. We were made in the image of God, we bear that image within our very beings.

This is not an image we earn by racking up reward points. It isn't something we acquire. It is given. We are created, redeemed and renewed in the image of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Yet, it is so easy to forget who we truly are when so many other things lay claim to us.

What will help us to remember and live out our true identity?

What will help us be defined more by God than by marketing and consumption?

I struggle with this regularly. But, honestly, giving a percentage of my income back to God has really helped. I'm not just saying this because this month is our stewardship appeal; it has really made a difference. My husband and I want our lives to be shaped more by God's abundance than by the consumer culture. We want to be part of God's work of helping everyone know abundance rather than scarcity - God's work of healing the world. So, we give a percentage of our income each month. This has helped us to make choices that shape us - we don't buy as much, we don't eat out as much. We're still working on this. Consumerism is constantly pulling but we are finding more joy and freedom in God; we are learning to trust God more.

This practice doesn't earn us reward points and I share it not to try to make us look good. I share it to invite us all to reflect together about how things, images and finances shape us, and how we can be more open to God's shaping of us.

In November, you will get a letter inviting you to consider giving a certain amount or more in the next year. This truly is an invitation to a practice that helps us to remember who we are. We are made in God's image. God helps us to know this and to reflect this.

Amen.