

Sermon – Matthew 22:15-22
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Grace Lutheran Church
21 Pentecost – Year A
22 October 2023

“Imagine That”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Just look straight ahead, they told us repeatedly. That’s all we had to remember. We were standing on the lawn outside Glenn Memorial United Methodist Church on a pleasant May morning. Our final papers and projects had been submitted and approved. We were cleared to receive our degrees, with three years of dedication giving way to the joys of graduation. There was nothing left for us to do, except to remember that, when our turn came to walk across the stage and stand with the dean and the program director, we had to look straight ahead so that the photographer could capture the moment. Simple. When the time came, I heard my name spoken with great solemnity. I strode onto the stage, shook hands with the appropriate dignitaries, and promptly forgot the one thing I was supposed to remember until it was too late. Instead of capturing a joyful moment, the official photographer captured a photo of me looking for the official photographer. I must have looked everywhere except straight ahead; I certainly did not look in any way distinguished. Needless to say, when I received the email inviting me to purchase the pictures, I took one look at the proof and hit the delete button. What should have been a lovely image capturing a lovely moment was instead an image gone wrong. Thank goodness Erika was there to better capture the moment.

2. A question of images, and of what's right and what's wrong, is at the heart of today's reading from Matthew, set in the last week of Jesus' life. By this point, Jesus – with his message of forgiveness and love – has managed to anger and alienate just about everybody. So much so that the Pharisees and the Herodians find themselves in league against him. The Pharisees were bitterly opposed to Roman occupation but, unlike Jesus, believed that strict adherence to the law was the path to redemption. The Herodians, by contrast, were a party of political expediency who supported Herod, the local king propped up by the empire. Neither group had any use for Jesus, so they set out to trap him with a question about taxes: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor? Jesus sees it for the trap that it is and refuses to give them what they want. Instead, he calls for a coin and asks a question: Whose image is on the coin? Caesar's? Well, give him what is his, but give to God what belongs to God.

3. One way to hear this is to think that Jesus is describing a separation of powers, as if some things are secular and others are holy, some earthly while others are heavenly. But nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus does not encourage us to remove ourselves from the world around us, but rather to participate in the world, no matter how broken by powers imperial or otherwise. We pay taxes to imperfect governments hoping as citizens that they will be used well and working to make sure that's the case. But we give to God what is God's. And what belongs to God? Everything. The secular and the earthly belong to the Lord, and the Lord is at work in these places. The coins in your pockets may bear the images of dead presidents, but you bear the image of a living God. You were made in the *imago dei*, the image of God, and you are marked anew by the cross of Christ, a restored image that empire cannot erase.

4. The past two weeks have been filled with images of brokenness, reminders of the powers and principalities named war and violence and hate. Images of

the evil brutality of the attack by Hamas. Images of a growing crisis and diminishing hope in Gaza. This deep conflict predates October 7, of course. Its roots extend back well before 1948. And while it is not the same conflict, our Old Testament reading reminds us that there has often been war in the land we call holy. But Isaiah also reminds us that God is always at work, even when we cannot see God's hand, even in ways and through people surprising to us, like Cyrus the gentile. God is working to restore and reconcile. Surely God is at work today, though things seem nearly hopeless.

5. Perhaps our call as Christians in this moment is to bear witness to the truth that all people, Christian or otherwise, are made in and marked by the *imago dei*. We share this belief with the other Abrahamic faiths. On Tuesday, I attended an evening of solidarity with our Jewish neighbors from West Suburban Temple Har Zion and Oak Park Temple. It was a night of grief and lament. But it was not a night of vengeance. One rabbi spoke of the need to remember the sanctity of *all* human life, condemning the senseless killing of six-year-old Wadea Al-Fayoume and urging Israel to work for the safety of non-combatants. On Thursday, I attended the fall gathering of the Community of Congregations, which this year was a panel discussion with members of the Oak Park Muslim Community. The event was planned prior to recent events but took on new meaning in light of them. One panelist, with roots and family in Palestine, spoke of the need in these moments to come more closely together as human beings, not to push further apart. On both nights, with neighbors both Jewish and Muslim, the theme of *imago dei* emerged. I do not know how peace can come. It seems impossible. But I know that the people of Israel deserve safety and freedom. That the people of Palestine deserve freedom and safety. That all people deserve dignity, for all are made and marked by God. And we, those baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, are called to look straight ahead toward Christ, standing with our neighbors as we work for peace, trusting that God is still at work in this broken world.

6. In Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, the priest at the center of the story spends a night in prison among people it would be easy to hate. Instead, he muses in the darkness, "When you visualized a man or woman carefully, you could always begin to feel pity – that was a quality God's image carried with it. When you saw the lines at the corners of the eyes, the shape of the mouth, how the hair grew, it was impossible to hate. Hate was just a failure of imagination." Yes. Hate is a failure of imagination. Seeing ourselves and one another as made in God's image opens up a new imagination, one in which the message for which Christ was crucified has become the gospel of resurrection hope in which all things are possible. You bear God's image, the cross of Christ traced indelibly upon your brow. Look straight ahead, focused on peace – with hope, despite everything. For everything belongs to God, and God is not finished yet. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.