

Sermon – Matthew 22:15-22
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
21 Pentecost – Year A
Confirmation Sunday
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“Indelible Images”

Confirmands, family and friends, all people in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I usually reserve props for my children’s sermons, but on Confirmation Sunday we don’t have one of those. So, this seems as good a time as any to reintroduce you to my best friend from childhood, David Lyle. I don’t remember getting this teddy bear, he was simply always there. And it does seem a bit odd that he has the same name as me, but it says so right here. My kids told me today that of all the David Lyles they know, this one is their favorite. I’m not sure what to do with that! Truth be told, nearly everything I owned as a little boy had this same name tape sewn onto it. My mother must’ve thought I would misplace everything I owned, which, now that I’m a parent, is a sentiment I can very much understand. But this David Lyle wasn’t just property to keep track of; he was (and is!) a beloved friend who is marked with my own name.
2. To put one’s name or image upon something is to make it their own, from brand-name clothing to the branding of cattle. This is what’s at the heart of the dispute in today’s gospel reading from Matthew. The assorted leaders arrayed against Jesus – today including the Pharisees and the Herodians, two groups who disliked each other so much that the only thing they had in common was their mutual dislike of Jesus – come to him with a question. On the third day of what would become known as Holy Week, they come to him with a trap: Tell us, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? The Pharisees

are opposed to Roman occupation, while the Herodians gleefully support it for their own enrichment, but they both know that an answer one way or the other could doom Jesus.

3. No one likes to pay taxes. Not us, but especially not those who lived under the bootheel of Rome, where taxes were less a way to support the common good and more an extractive tool of oppression and subjugation. But Jesus sees something more than taxes at work here. He knows that their question means more than they know; it is about identity and belonging. Whose image is on the coin? Caesar's? Fine, give unto Caesar. But another question lurks under the surface: Forget the coins; whose image is on you?

4. On this Confirmation Sunday, identity and belonging are what it's all about. Friends, at some point in the past – for some of you, you were babies, others were old enough that you can remember – your parents brought you to the font, in this congregation or another, and God claimed you as a child of God in the waters of baptism. Last night, these ten young people stood in this space to give their witness statements, and they each offered incredible insight into the life of faith. What does it mean to be washed in the waters of baptism and marked with the image of God? For many, it is the profound reminder that God is with them in all things, now and in the future. After all, as Will points out, God “knows me better than I do” and “will be with me through everything.” Grace writes, “I know that Jesus will be with me no matter what the future holds.” Mae notes that her faith “has helped me focus on the present, instead of worrying about what is to come.” And of course, not everything that comes will always be good. As Avery succinctly puts it, “bad happens, but [God] can make good happen, too.” And when bad things happen, our faith opens us outward. Annelise, reflecting on a sad event in her school community, writes that, “My faith in God helped me realized that I needed to be brave in the face of my own grief so that I could help my friends face theirs.”

5. Jesus is well aware that we live in a broken world with many competing claims upon our lives, forces that seek to brand us. If we weren't trapped in sin and suffering, if death did not hold such sway over the way we live, Jesus wouldn't have had to come and save us. His encounter with the Pharisees and the Herodians happens just days before the death he knows is coming. The powers of this world, religious and political, are just not that interested in his message of grace and love. The empire – and there's always an empire – is ruled by a Caesar who would put his own face on the coins to remind everyone who is in charge. The empire does all it can to rid itself of Jesus, putting him to death brutally and publicly. But God refuses to accept our “no,” and continues to say “yes” to us. Jesus' death, in the mystery of God's grace, becomes the mechanism for life. For God so loved the world. The giving of God's Son is, as Angelina says, “the greatest example of God's love.” Our lives in this world are ever shaped by the death and resurrection of Jesus in which we were baptized, and in which the *imago dei*, the image of God in which we were made, has been so beautifully restored.

6. Restored and reconciled to God in Christ, our faith opens us up to our neighbors, wherever they may be. After all, as Mikey reminds us, our neighbors “are also *literally* made in the image of the one true God,” and we are to treat them accordingly. Norah says, “Being a person of faith calls me to see others in the best possible light and not jump to conclusions.” The empires of this world will always seek to grind us down and build themselves up. Refusing to pay our taxes won't do much to change this. Jesus knows that the whole order must be overturned, and that begins in his cross. As those joined to him in the resurrection, we know that the best insurrection is love. Seeing ourselves and one another as those made and marked by God begins to change everything.

7. So, dear friends, as you claim your faith as your own and say “yes” to God’s “yes,” keep living out the promises of your baptism. This begins, of course, by staying connected to your faith community. It’s not easy, as Jack notes, “especially when I wake up early all week and want to sleep in,” I hear you! But Jack goes on: “getting into the church and worshipping God and what [God] did as Jesus feels very rewarding.” Whatever your future holds, good and bad, your future is held by God. Let your life be a song of praise. Anders writes, “Singing is one of the best ways to praise God, and God even returns the favor by exulting over us with singing.” (Love you, kid.) Keep joining the song, friends. Keep praising your God. Continue to serve your neighbors. We are cheering you on, and you will always have a home here at Grace. So, sure, give to Caesar what is Caesar’s. But give to God what belongs to God. And that’s everything, for God gave everything, even the Son, for you that you would have life. God’s image is indelibly marked upon you, and you bear the name of Jesus Christ forever. You will never be lost again. Amen.

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