

These Beauties Are Mine

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 20A

Matthew 22:15-22

It's that time of the year again when we human beings are going to engage in what must be one of the most peculiar and uniquely human of all behaviors. Many of us are going to invest a good bit of time and energy and even some hard-earned money to locate and obtain a specific variety of squash that we think fits a certain criteria we have in mind. In fact, some of us are even going to ride a wagon or a tractor out into a field that we don't even own with the sole purpose of choosing one of these perfect squashes. We are going to buy that specific variety of squash, called a pumpkin, and we are not going to eat it. We are going to hollow that thing out and we're going to carve a face in it. And then we're going to put a candle in it so that the face lights up at night.

Regardless of what you believe about the origins of this Halloween practice, you have to admit it's quite a preposterous one. Personally, I have no problem with making jack-o-lanterns. I think it's a lot of fun and, in fact, several church groups I've been a part of have carved pumpkins together. However, as human practices go, from start to finish, it's pretty eccentric! If you ever are tempted to believe that humans are really not that different from the rest of the animal world, that we're just another organism inhabiting the galaxy, think about all these hollow vegetables with elaborate faces on them! What else does something like that??

In fact, you can branch out from there quite easily, because we humans like to put our image and leave our mark on a lot of things. From graffiti art on a subway car to the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, from cave drawings thousands of years old to computer avatars today—in art, poetry, or the craftsmanship of a decent and honest job, in the wisdom we impart to our young—human beings have always felt drawn to imbue the things they create with their own image. It's one of those features we share in common with God. It's a way we take control of our surroundings, make order from chaos. This is the way that we place our mark on the world and leave a legacy. And it is also a way we claim things as our own, for ourselves...not simply a goofy pumpkin with the lopsided smile, but things with far greater importance: *This* cave corner that keeps me safe. *This* cathedral we broke our backs to construct. *This* city skyline that cuts a stunning profile above the landscape.

This is likely how coins and other forms of money had come to be formed with the images and trademarks of emperors and queens and other people in power. It was a way for them to consolidate their power and to control the people. Not too unlike how we, in Halloween spirit have put surprising faces on pumpkins, Caesar, in Jesus' time, had stamped his own face on the denarius coin. So, then, every time goods and services exchanged hands it was like Caesar was there, saying "This is mine." Every time one of the empire's taxes came up, Caesar was there, proclaiming, "This is mine, too."

The people of religion loathed it. Currency, especially with a human face on it, was the stuff of idolatry. It was easy to see, for one, how people could start to worship it, to give it more value than anything else. In fact, in addition to Caesar's likeness, each coin also bore an inscription: "Tiberius Caesar, Augustus, son of divine Augustus." So it was no wonder that the Jewish authorities would have despised them so much. Simply the use of the money was a constant reminder of the Roman occupation, and the

yearly census tax made it even worse. Each time that tax was paid with one of those coins, it felt like worship to a false god.

This is precisely why the Jewish religious leaders find this to be the perfect way to trap Jesus. If Jesus agrees to the payment of Caesar's yearly tax, then he will become immediately unpopular with the crowds of ordinary folk who are following him. They, too, feel that Caesar's face is everywhere, oppressing their livelihood, and this yearly tax (I know it's hard to imagine) was deeply unpopular. It was another form of tribute; that is, a system whereby they handed over a portion of their livelihood in return for protection and the right to live. By consenting to that system he will be seen as just another one of the spineless leaders in hock to the Roman army trying to maintain the *status quo*. However, if Jesus agrees it is unlawful to pay the tax then he becomes a normal revolutionary, an upstart warmonger who wants to overthrow Rome. It will be much easier for the authorities to encircle him and label him as trouble.

Jesus' response about paying the tax is remarkable. He manages to wiggle out of the trap by reminding them of something that everyone finds so easy to forget, or worse, easy to deny. What's more extraordinary and ingenious than the face of Caesar on a coin? Well, the fact that each one of us—each pumpkin-carver among us, each cave-wall scribbler, each money-minter—bears a mark on his or her very life. What's more astonishing than an entire system of currency containing the image of the emperor who made it? The truth that each one of our communities is a treasury minted in the image of our Creator. From Jesus' point of view, it is no big deal at all to pay Caesar's tribute with the money in our pockets once we remember that we pay tribute of thanksgiving and service to God the Father each and every day with our lives. The currency of Caesar is copper, stone, and sword. Those are powerful, insofar as you want to build a city or an army or pave a road. But the currency of the Creator are things like flesh and blood, intellect and language, creativity and morality and kindness. And imagine what those things can build.

To be reminded that we are created in God's image is no small thing. I wonder if the Pharisees and Herodians had forgotten it, caught up, as they were, in fretting about how Caesar was laying claim to everything. Come to think of it, I'm not sure we really know what it means anymore to be made in God's image. We hear so many competing definitions of what it means to be human nowadays that our divine qualities get glossed over or downplayed. The brain is just one giant computer, programmed from birth, some say. Others tell us all our features of human-ness can just be explained by cold-hard science, as long as we have the time to figure it out. More likely, we don't hear these things; we just feel them. So many of us get the impression that we are just cogs in a giant machine, working, day in and day out, to pay the bills and make ends meet, worrying if we'll have enough for retirement, slaving to consume and purchase things that leave us unfulfilled. Millions of others of us scrape by in the filthy slums of the world's poorest communities, living on little more than a denarius a day. We see, we hear, we sense deep in our bones that we are just pawns of whichever cruel empire we have, that we are mass-produced squishy computers that can just be controlled and manipulated.

The reality, we must remember, is different. The reality is that God has carefully picked out and chosen each person who has ever walked on this earth, male and female, and said, "*This* one. This one is mine." The reality is that each victim of COVID who seems destined to become just another statistic, destined to become just another contagion for us to fear in the attention-hungry news cycle, bears the image of

God. It means that black lives bear God's image, just as do the people who have systematically oppressed people of color through the years.

But bearing God's image does not just mean that we are precious or worthy. It means that we have the capacity re-present God in our very thoughts and actions and interact with creation in the same manner that God can. It means that as much as we participate in a world that will always try to convince us otherwise, we have been designed to reflect these holy qualities back to someone else in a way that contributes to the good, to praise someone other than ourselves.

A recent edition of the magazine *Intelligent Life* ran an article where they asked six leaders in very intellectual fields to answer a question: what's is the point? Noted novelist and atheist Philip Pullman weighed in, as did a philosopher, a poet, a psychoanalyst and, lastly, a reporter. Their articulate responses were all fairly interesting to read, very auspicious-sounding, full of wisdom and observation. Most compelling for me, however, was the simple four-word response that came from the biographer and obituarist Ann Wroe. She was the one person among that list whose career essentially involves scouring the sum total of people's life stories and finding within them some pattern and meaning. Ms. Wroe responded curtly, "The point is love."

Yes, love is ultimately what we and no one else are able to render to God and creation. It was placed there in the beginning and it remains there still, like a small tea light in the bottom of a hollowed-out pumpkin. And even when our godlike image is so tarnished and broken, so demolished by sin and our self-serving behavior that we are not sure we are even able to love, not able to recognize the healing powers of our speech, our intellect, our creativity, much less lift it to God...then we remember that God has become one of us in that human image. And because of that, we can see that even in death, even in utter suffering, we still bear the image of the divine. Even as we breathe our last and the story of our life comes to a close there is still opportunity to reflect God's glory. Caesar's army and tax may be powerful, but imagine all the force of justice and righteousness if our redeemed lives were offered in tribute each and every day to the Lord of heaven and earth because the point is love. Imagine the love of Christ unleashed in each of our forgiven lives, knowing our own value and seeing value in each human being. Mercy! What would that economy look like! God has loved us into bearing his image, and now we bear that back!

That, I believe, is what Jesus envisions as I see him flipping that coin back into the hands of the Pharisees. He isn't all that impressed with the power of cash or currency, but rather with the beauty of our very beings offered 100% in grateful devotion—each one of us, like a beautiful masterpiece jack-o-lantern, who has learned from Christ that the point is love, each one of us, our lights glowing from the inside and shining that smile of existence right back in praise of the one who carved us.

And Jesus envisions that Creator gazing right back, with them lined up on the front porch of his creation, saying, "*These*. These beauties are *mine*."

Thanks be to God!