

Isaiah 45:1-7
Psalm 96:1-9
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

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Our True Identity

A man went on a nature walk. A bear began to chase him, so he climbed a tree. As he was climbing he slipped down into the bear's arms. He prayed, "Lord, I come to thee at the hour of my death. If this be a Christian bear, deliver me from this end. If it not be, take me home swiftly." The bear said, "Lord, thank you for this food."¹

Much like this poor man who found himself in the arms of a hungry bear – Christian or not – neither of the options promised him a good outcome. In other words the man is in a lose-lose situation, much like the one we find Jesus in today's Gospel reading.

The Herodians, followers of Herod Antipas, the Jewish puppet king named by Rome, and Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders, have come together and gather around Jesus in the Temple for a game of "gotcha!" It will be the first of three attempts to ensnare Jesus, to trip him up into giving the wrong answer as a means to justify getting rid of him who has proven to be a growing threat to their power and control in Palestine.

In first century Palestine the coin of the realm was the Roman denarius. It was a silver coin that was stamped with the profile of the Roman emperor, the divine ruler of the empire. This left no doubt that Rome was in control and all subjects must pay tribute to Caesar, the Roman god. No one was exempt from taxation, including the Jews in Palestine. To refuse to pay tribute was considered an act of treason, of sedition, which was the position of the Herodian's, who supported Rome. On the other hand, the Pharisees, the conservative religious leaders, believed that to pay taxes to Caesar, who claimed to be a god himself, was a sin against the one true, living God. To even possess a Roman denarius was heresy because it bore the image of a pagan god.² The Herodians and Pharisees, with their divided loyalties were an unlikely alliance. But, they had one thing in common. They wanted Jesus gone.

One of them approaches Jesus and he falsely praises him. "We know that you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with truth and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality" (Matt. 22:16). Ironically, what they say about Jesus is all true. He

¹Ian S. Markham & Samantha R.E Gottlich, *Lectionary Levity*, (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 159.

²This is why there were money changers in the Temple. Jews would exchange their Roman denarii for the Hebrew Scheckel needed to purchase their animal sacrifice to give to the Temple priests.

shows the same love and compassion toward everyone without exception. – living into the commandment of loving our neighbor as ourselves. But, this irony is lost on them. Then they set the trap as they put the question to Jesus, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” In their hubris they assume that no matter how he answers Jesus will lose the argument. They will have him arrested for either sedition or heresy and be done with him once and for all. However, Jesus sees through this charade and pulls out the “theological” rug from underneath them, taking the issue to a much deeper understanding of our true identity as children of God.

Jesus asks for a denarius and asks whose head and title is on the coin. After they respond Jesus gives a most profound but confusing answer, “Render to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21). They are stunned into silence and with no witty repartee on the tip of their tongue they exchange a few puzzled glances and make a hasty retreat.

In this one sentence Jesus does not simply evade their trap he also but issues a challenge to his hearers that reverberates through the ages into our sanctuaries today.³ Jesus seems to support the Roman occupying government. Whatever tribute is owed should be paid. However, there is more. He goes on to say that all that is God’s should be given to God. What Jesus doesn’t say but alludes to is the sovereignty of God.⁴ All comes from God and all belongs to God – without exception. Caesar many have his image stamped on every coin throughout the realm but each one of us has the image of God stamped on our very souls.⁵ “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in, the world and all who dwell therein. For it is God who founded it upon the seas and made it firm upon the rivers of the deep” (Psalm 24:1,2).

You and I belong to God. It is a fact of life we often forget, as did the Herodians and the Pharisees so long ago. This eternal truth is the very ground our being. It is the basis of our true identity as the cherished daughters and sons of God. And, it is genesis of our relationship with the one, true living God. When we are reminded and reclaim our connection to this divine reality, be it through prayer, a dream, a mystical experience, witnessing a most spectacular sunset or whatever it may be, everything changes. We never see the world the same way.

Recently, I saw a video of a middle aged man who received a birthday gift. He stood on his front porch with his family gathered around him as he tore off the wrapping paper and opened a small box to find a pair of what looked like ordinary sun glasses. The man put on the sunglasses and something extraordinary happened. As he looked all around with his new glasses he was overcome with emotion. He covered his face with his hands and his shoulders began to shake as he cried with pure joy at what he had experienced. This man is colorblind. These sunglasses have a special lens that allow him to see the full array of colors for the first time in his life. He has never seen God’s creation, including his loved ones, in all the glory of full color until now. The man and how he sees the world is forever changed.

³ David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/10/pentecost-20-image-likeness-and-identity/>, last accessed on 10/21/2017.

⁴James Koester, <https://www.ssje.org/2012/06/05/belonging-to-god-br-james-koester/>, last accessed on 10/21/2017.

⁵Richard E. Spalding, *Feasting on the Word*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 192.

Once we accept that we are truly God's, it decides everything; the choices we make each day; how we see a stranger; how we spend our time; the books we read; the way we see the world; how we are able to forgive others and even ourselves; how we see our responsibilities to each other and the world; and, even how we spend our money. Nothing in our lives is untouched when we remember that we belong, not to ourselves but to God. Just as the man who looked through special lenses to see the true beauty of the world, when we see God's abundant grace at work in the world and in our lives, we see the world anew, as if for the first time. In response we can't but "sing to the Lord a new song and worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" (Psalm 96: 1,9).

I can't think of a better way to celebrate God's gift of life and abundant love than with the baptism of Eloise and Cecelia, the two newest members of our parish family. As we welcome them into the household of God, we are reminded that, by virtue of our own baptism, we do not possess our own lives.⁶ We belong to God. Through the baptismal waters we have died with Christ and are born anew with the Risen Christ. And we are marked as Christ's own forever. We are made in God's image and it is stamped on our souls for all eternity. God makes us "stewards of the life that God has given us, and for however long God continues to give us breath...Our life is not about hoarding or about conserving itself for its own sake but its opposite: it is about giving."⁷ This is the abundant life Jesus promises us; it is the authentic life you and I were made for.

Amen.

⁶ Curtis Almquist, SSJE, <http://ssje.org/ssje/2006/08/29/beheading-of-john-the-baptist/>, last accessed October 15, 2015.

⁷ Almquist.