

My sermon is short. I love this story.

A young woman was at the beach, working on her tan, when a little boy in swim trunks walked up to her and said, “Lady, do you believe in God?” She looked up, surprised, and she answered, “Well, yes, I do.” Then he asked, “Do you go to church every Sunday?” She answered, “Well, yeah.” Then he asked pointedly, “Do you read your Bible, and do you pray every day?” Again, she said, “Yeah.” Finally, the boy said, “Okay, okay then, you can hold my dollar while I go swimming.”

He was asking honest questions to find out if he could trust that lady. Now, if you remember back to the Scripture reading just a moment ago, the Pharisees were not asking honest questions, no, they wanted to find out anything they could about Jesus, trying to trick him into saying something or doing something that they could use against him, sort of like a modern day press conference. You’ve heard those kinds of questions at press conferences. “Senator, isn’t it true that you stopped beating your wife?” How do you answer that? You get the picture. When you want to destroy someone, it doesn’t matter how you do it. You could paint him as a fake or you could frame him as a fraud or someone who hangs out with all of the wrong people or even in private, he’s a threat to the nation. You know, they tried every one of these with Jesus.

Now, they began first with compliments and flattery, but you know, sometimes when a person’s patting you on the back, they’re just looking for a nice soft spot to stick in the knife, and that’s what they were doing. They buttered him up. In one translation it says, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and that you teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and you show no deference for anyone, and you have no regard for people with partiality, and so, tell us, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” I want you to see how perfectly they thought they had Jesus trapped. The emperor had a standing army, and had proclaimed himself god, and he was controlling and threatening all the good Jews in Jerusalem and around. Now, if Jesus said go ahead and pay the tax, pay that tribute to Caesar, the oppressor who took your homeland, if Jesus said that, he would be seen as anti-God, as a coward, and as a collaborator with the enemy. He could be tried as an enemy of the Jewish faith. On the other hand, if Jesus said do not pay the taxes to Caesar, do not pay them, the same Caesar who did indeed have military power on every street corner, then Jesus would be arrested as an enemy of the state, as a revolutionary, as a dangerous troublemaker! They thought they had him cold! Are you for Rome, or are you against Rome? Is it okay to pay your taxes or not? You see, taxes have always been an issue. This is not just a recent thing. As somebody has said, “You may not agree with every department of the government, but you really have to hand it to the IRS.” Okay.

All right, I’ll try one more. A comedian once said, “I feel honored to pay taxes in America. The thing is, I could feel just honored by paying about half as much!” All right.

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The Scripture. The Scripture breaks three rules at once. It brings up politics and money and religion all at the same time, but this is not really about money. Money was just the weapon of the day that they were trying to use against Jesus. They had already decided that he must be destroyed. Jesus knew they were trying to trick him so he said, “Show me the money! Show me the money!” So they dug around in their pockets, and they pulled out a coin, but there is something you may not know. Remember first the number one commandment of Judaism and the foundation of Christianity as well is that there is only one God, and you shall have no other Gods before you, no idols, no worship of graven images or belief in other gods. One God from before the beginning to after the end! What is not widely known is that on that coin, on the coin they handed to Jesus, there was a graven image of Caesar with the inscription “deus” or God in Latin. Now, not all coins in the Jewish homeland had images of Caesar. Out of respect for the Jewish law, coins minted by Herod the Great and his son, Herod Antipas, did not have any images. Devout Jews avoided using coins with images, especially images that said “Caesar is God.” So Jesus pulled a double reverse on these people trying to trick him! When he said, “Show me the money,” they dug around, thinking they had won, pulled out the coin, and Jesus said, “Whose picture is on that?” When they said, “Caesar’s,” he had exposed them, not himself, as deceptive and hypocritical compromisers with the Roman occupiers. They were the ones carrying around Caesar’s money, not Jesus! They were the ones who had the emperor’s image in their pocketbooks and the pagan propaganda on the obverse side saying, “Caesar is God.” A good, Torah-loving Jew would not have brought a Roman coin with a graven image of the emperor on one side and the emperor’s claim to God on the other into the temple. So Jesus, I want you to picture him looking knowingly at the crowd, and maybe even winking at the crowd, and asking, “Now, whose image is on that coin?” They said, “Caesar’s.” He said, “Okay, then give it back to Caesar. He made it.”

Now, here’s the point. Picture this. In whose image are we made? In whose image are humans created? God’s. Yes, from Adam all the way down, with the infinite variety of faces and races and features, all humanity is created in the image of God. Everyone in this fight knew that same teaching so here’s what most likely happened when he said, “Show me the money. Yes, I see the great creator Caesar has created some coins, which say he is God. How nice! Next year, they may be new coins with a new god, a new Caesar. Give them back to him who asketh. They are his to begin with.” Then, I picture maybe Jesus reaches out and touches the arm of one of the questioners and says, “But what about you? What about you? Or you and you and you? Whose image do you bear?” Do you see it, the bigger picture? Whose image do you bear? Jesus was saying, “Rabbi, give your whole self to the one who has imprinted the divine image upon you. You, a fellow Rabbi, know the story, all I have said is to remind you.” The government did not make you, did not create you, does not own you, collaborating in such a lie makes you less than you were meant to be, and so you, whether in the story, or whether modern Methodists today here at Main Street were created and bear the image of the one true God. The God Jesus Christ made known in His life and teaching, made known by the depth of His love and compassion, by His cross and resurrection, that is the image that we were meant to bear. Render unto Caesar another temporary power, what is temporary, that coin, and render yourself and your soul and your love and your allegiance unto God in whose image you were made, and as you look around, you will notice that your neighbors, far and near,

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whether subjects of this nation or that nation, also bear the same image of the same Creator that God has made known in Jesus Christ. So we have an obligation to them as well.

There is an English comedian named Eddie Izzard, and he makes fun of the English Colonial explorers. You know, how they used to travel around the world looking for places that no other European had discovered, and Izzard does this comedy bit where he imagines them walking ashore, and they're surprised to find there is somebody who already occupies that land, and they say, "Oh, you say you live here. Oh, dear! Humph, well do you have a flag?" The people said, "No." They said, "Oh," and they put their flag down and said, "I claim this land in the name of Her Majesty the Queen." Planting the flag as though that makes it theirs. We like to lay claim on things. Caesar claimed to be God and to own his citizens, body and soul. You were baptized. You were baptized, and in that, God laid claim on you. God said, "You belong to Me, not to the world. You belong to eternity, not to death and dust." By faith and trust in the God who came to us in Jesus Christ, we give ourselves completely to God, and God, being the God of all who bear his image, always sends us out to others, as we have heard this morning. Didn't Jesus already say all this? What belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar, listen again from the same chapter, Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord, your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, with all of your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two Commandments hang all of the law and the prophets. As Christians we know full well that our faith has no nationality nor race nor political party, but it does have the awesome truth that we are made in the image of God, and when we do render unto God what belongs to God, we render our hearts, our souls, and our minds. We find out that our faith is not and cannot be mere words printed on a page. Our faith, the faith that Jesus lived, involves action, always action on behalf of others. Always when we love God, it is shown forth in the love of neighbor, the desire for what is good and what is healing and what is needful for our neighbors.

In James, the second chapter, in the New Testament, he writes, "What good is it my brothers and sisters, my fellow Christians, what good is it to say you have faith, but do not have works? Can such a faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace. Keep warm. Be filled," and yet does not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead, but someone will say, "Well, you have faith and I have works." James challenges, "Show me your faith. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I, by my works, will show you my faith."

Politics come and go, God stays. Nations and political systems come and go, but there will always be needy neighbors, some who need things that it's beyond the power of any state to provide. Render as a citizen what citizens must render. As a child of God, owned heart, mind and soul, render to God the recognition that you know in whose image you were made, and in whose image your needy neighbor was made. What belongs to God? This is not a new message. The prophet Micah said it long before, and I will close with Micah's message. "What belongs to God? He has told you, oh mortal. What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God." Amen.