

21st Sunday after Pentecost October 22, 2023- Commitment Sunday

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

If you have been a follower of Jesus for any length of time and have lived through stewardship campaigns then with this Gospel text and knowing it is commitment Sunday, you could probably write the sermon. It's a bit of a softball isn't it?

A reminder that all that exists is God's. Sun, moon, stars, your life, the wood in the frame of your house, the silicon in your computers, the oil that became the plastics in your home. The skill with your hands. The smarts of your brain. All this comes, ultimately, from God. Jesus says, give back to God that which is God's. Which is...everything.

When I was growing up the standard offertory prayer was this- We offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us, ourselves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us- Jesus Christ our Lord.

Can't you hear the conclusion of this sermon coming with about as much subtlety as the plot of a Hallmark Christmas movie? So, your financial commitments for 2024 are offered up freely acknowledging that it all belongs to God anyway. A way or orienting ourselves in right relationship with God and our money even as we support the mission and ministry of the church.

But I'm not going there. Here is the simple truth.

Pragmatically, we need your generosity to fund the mission and ministry of St. John. We have no other sources of income than you. Your generosity towards

our mission and ministry will determine what that mission and ministry will look like.

I do believe that our stewardship of the resources God has given us- including our giving to support the mission and ministry of the church- is a spiritual practice. That it is an important way to deepen our faith towards God and love of one another. This is a discipline I have engaged in as an adult and was raised in as a child. And I find it helpful.

Third, and most important, what you give or don't give to the mission and ministry of St. John will never change the absolute love that God has for you. That love for you is the same if you give nothing or if you give everything. Your participation in this stewardship campaign or our Capital Campaign will not save you. Jesus does that. Period.

Now, with that out of the way, here is the sermon.

Jesus asks the gathered Pharisees and Herodians whose head is on the coin. The language used in the Greek is the same word that God uses for human's being created in God's image in Genesis. It might be phrased, "Whose image is this, and whose title?"

If the coin has Caesars' head and title on it, well it must belong to him! Kind of like how your parents would put your name on everything that went to camp with you so it wouldn't get lost. Left unsaid, but certainly being spoken in the minds of his disciples is that reminder from Genesis 1:27 that all human beings are made in the image of God. God's image is upon us, so we must belong to God.

Jesus doesn't outright answer the question of the Pharisees and Herodians because he knows it is a political trap meant to get him in trouble with the Roman authorities or with the Jewish crowd. Instead, he re-orient's everyone's thinking. Reframes the question to help people discover their own answer.

Think about it. You are made in the image of God. Just like the coin, it does not mean that we are God. The coin is not Caesar. But there is something in us, about us, all of us, that makes us unlike anything in the rest of creation. Perhaps it is the ability we have to create. Perhaps it is the cognitive power we have greater than any other creature. Either way, we have been imbued with great power, privilege, and responsibility by God.

Also, this God whose image we bear, is the one who created us. Who gifted us with all that is unique and wonderful about us. Our hair color, our nose, the ability to snap our fingers or craft a quilt. Our head for numbers or a well-turned phrase. All this was given to you by God and in a combination that is unique to you.

A combination that when put together with other uniquely created in the image of God human beings, into a community of believers, makes for a church that can do amazing things in the world to show forth the reign of God.

Friends, fellow humans created in the image of God, I give thanks to God for all of you, remembering before God your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope. As you sew together scraps of cloth into a quilt that will be someone's only shelter as they have been wrenched from home by war, disease, or famine. As you surround one another in times of sickness and in death. As you care for family and friends. As you assemble to

provide faith formation for our children, music for our souls in worship, food for our bellies in fellowship. I give thanks to God for all of you in your diverse and unique made in the image of God-ness.

For I know, siblings in Christ, beloved by God, that God has chosen you. Each of you. Through the waters of baptism from which God lifts us clean and pure. Chosen you, through the love of God in Jesus Christ. Called you with the power of the Holy Spirit. Assembled together to be the very hands and feet of God in the world in Ely, and Solon, and Cedar Rapids, and Mt. Vernon. At work and at school. At home and when you are away.

And when we can see these truths. That we bear the image of God. That we are gifted and beloved. That every other human being in the world bears that same image of God. When we become imitators of the one whose image we bear. When we honor the name of Christ-ian, then that Holy Spirit of God will act in and through us to help people to see. See how we have turned from the idols of this world and serve a living and true God. Not ones of our own making, but the one who made us!

And they will desire that for themselves. They won't be able to help it. For the Holy Spirit will work in and through our every word and action to call them into being more fully what they are- created in the image of God, beloved by God.

When we see these truths, we will be re-oriented to God and to ourselves. How can I do awful, harmful, deadly things to another human being created in the image of God? Beloved by God? When they do these awful things to me, how do I respond in a way that honors the image of God that resides in both me and you?

When we see these truths, other human beings become not adversaries over and against us, but others wonderfully made by God, who we seek to work with.

Friends in Christ. God loves you. Period. In all of your messiness and imperfections. God loves you. You are chosen by God, named beloved, wonderfully gifted, and deserving of love and respect by yourself and others. And God's opinion is really the only one that matters.

Together, with God's help, we can do all things. Wonderful, healing, life giving, amazing things. For each of you is a vital part of this body of Christ that is St. John. And each person who walks through those doors is a missing piece of this wonderful puzzle. Brings with them gifts and abilities, insights and vision we didn't even know we were missing.

In the middle of times that can be confusing, harrowing. With those around us who seem only to be out to trap us in what we say. Let us take our cue from Jesus and keep the main thing the main thing. To remember whose we are, and in whose image we are made. To love God with all that we are and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And to trust in God's grace and mercy when we fall short of that.

When we do that. When we work together. When we trust in God. The rest will take care of itself.

And for that I say, thanks be to God!