

“Life and Taxes”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
October 22, 2023 - Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 24

[Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22](#)

“In God We Trust,” it says, right here under the regal profile of our first president, George Washington. Like the most of the other coins minted by the United States government, our quarters include an image of one of our most important leaders, like George, following historic European coin-making traditions that followed even older coin-making traditions of the Roman Empire.

In today’s gospel lesson, we have an encounter with such an ancient coin, a Roman denarius, made out of silver with the face of the emperor stamped upon it. The denarius brought to Jesus that we read about in the lesson was likely stamped with the face of Tiberius Caesar along with his name and abbreviations for the words “august and divine son of Augustus, high priest.” Not all Jews of Jesus’ day would touch the coins, as many considered the image with the emperor’s title as “divine son” to be blasphemous and untouchable, but those that did hold them or even behold them would be reminded of the power of the empire that oppressed them and who was to be the recipient of the fruits of their labor and the beneficiary of their wealth as people paid required taxes to the empire annually.

The empire’s tax and the Jewish authorities who administered it were despised by the impoverished people of Palestine, which led on more than one occasion to a revolt, including one shortly after the birth of Jesus led by a Judas the Galilean, which didn’t end well for Judas (or anyone else who ever challenged the authority of Rome).

And so when some of Jesus’ opponents came to him and asked him if was lawful or right for people to pay the tax, they were trying to stick him in a tough spot, for if he answered that it was indeed lawful, he could have been labeled a supporter of the oppressing Romans with their blasphemous coins, and therefore be branded as an enemy to his own impoverished people. If he answered that it was not right or lawful to pay the tax to Rome, he would have been labeled an instigator of sedition (again, receiving that label also that usually led people to

receive an execution on a Roman cross). And so he offers a brilliant response that will not label him as either a friend of Rome or a rebel against them. He states, noting the image and name of the emperor upon the coin, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God the things that belong to God."

According to the teaching of Jesus, we are to give to the authorities what is due to them, but not in a way that supersedes our devotion to God, who remains our highest authority. For no matter our citizenship or to whom we pay taxes, we belong, above all, to God and are citizens of God's realm. We ourselves are minted by God and stamped with God's image, and so all that we have, including our very lives, belongs to God.

But will we give to God the things that belong to God? Too often, we choose not to. Too often, we give ourselves to other things that call most loudly for our attention and devotion, such as the accumulation of money and the growth of wealth for ourselves or those we love or the building of power over others. While neither growing in wealth or influence is a bad thing, doing so at the expense of our devotion to God is.

And so we, stamped with God's image, are created to live as faithful citizens of God's realm. We are called to the work of growing goodness in ourselves and among each other so that the blessings of God's abundant life can be better enjoyed by all of God's children around the world.

For we are not the only ones stamped with God's image. People in Israel are stamped with the image of God as are those living in Gaza. People who follow the ways of Jesus are stamped with the image of God; so are those who follow light from other lamps that cast light upon many other religious paths. People of all religions, nationalities, gender identities, sexualities, colors, shapes, sizes, abilities, and ages are stamped with the image of God.

Why is it so hard for us to see this image in one another? We are likely to struggle seeing God's image in all others if our focus is always on ourselves or we pay attention only to people who are like us. We also struggle when the selfish, hoarding ways of Caesar are the ways we embrace rather than the life-giving, sacrificial way of Christ to which we are called.

As we live our lives, paying our taxes to those who are due them, let us embrace our highest duty to live as good citizens of God's realm, receiving life from God so that we can give back to God by sharing life with others of all kinds. May this be our way today and always. Amen.