

Pastor Geoffrey R. Boyle
The Twenty-third Sunday after Trinity
19 November 2017
Mt 22:15-22

In the name of the Father, and of the T Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our most profound evil towards each other comes from failing to look one another in the *face*.
We make sweeping judgments against those looking for a handout,
yet refuse to look in the eyes of the man standing on the side of the road.
We talk about homosexuals and adulterers and their great perversity;
but if we looked her in the face, and heard her story,
our judgment might be a bit more humane.
Then there's the mega-rich, politicians, millennials, racists, terrorists, and fanatics—
everyone is easier to hate without a face.

But when you look someone in the face, you see a man or a woman, a boy or a girl.
You see humanity—
with age wearing into the skin, and the unique imperfections each one of us bears.
You'll see pain and joy, exhaustion and youthful energy.
You'll find tears and determination, gritted teeth and fear—
eyes that struggle to meet yours just as yours are afraid to meet his or hers.
There's a certain vulnerability when you deal with someone *face-to-face*—
a vulnerability you just can't find on-line behind a screen.

Today's Gospel is all about looking into the face of the other.
Interestingly, the Pharisees idea of fairness comes specifically apart from the face.
They say, "*Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully,
and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.*" (Mt 22:16)

The English "*swayed by appearances,*" glosses over what the Greek says more profoundly:
"*...for You do not look into the face of men.*"
(The idea was that by not looking at the face, he wouldn't show partiality.)

What we'll find is, in fact, just the opposite:
Jesus *does* look into the face of men and calls us to do the same—
it's the Pharisees who collectivize, categorize, and de-humanize, by avoiding the human face.

With all this, I think it's fair to say that this passage has nothing to do with paying taxes then or now.
Neither the Pharisees nor the Herodians were concerned about the tax—
it was simply the object lesson at hand for another attempt at trapping Jesus.

Though normally at odds with one another—
each seeking power by different political platforms—
the Pharisees and Herodians share a common enemy in Jesus.

The Herodians were collaborators with Rome and known for sucking up to Caesar.
Herod the Great ingratiated himself to Rome;
and, as a result, Rome granted some freedoms in Judea not allowed elsewhere.
The Herodians sought to maintain that stability by "*working*" with the Roman authorities.
You could say they had one foot in Rome and one in Jerusalem.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were Jewish nationalists: ritually pure and devoted to the Torah. They sought to preserve Jewish faith and culture and they despised the Roman occupation. They resented the Herodians for their collusion with Rome—
 whatever Judea might be, it could never be true Judea under Roman rule.

For their starkly different approaches, both the Pharisees and the Herodians have a common goal: the survival of their idea of what it means to be a son of Abraham.
 And as great a power as Rome was, Jesus presented the clearer threat.

Now, if Jesus said “yes” to paying taxes, then his followers would be greatly disappointed in him, thinking that his teaching wasn’t as radical as they had hoped.
 Jesus would be no better than the Herodians or the Sadducees.
 But, if Jesus said, “no” to the tax, the Herodians could arrest Jesus for sedition.

Of course, in true Jesus fashion, He refuses to answer the question in the way it’s asked. He doesn’t give a ‘yes’ or ‘no.’
 He knows it’s a trap and has nothing to do with taxes at all.
 Nevertheless, He uses their setup against them,
 making one of the most profound statements of what it means to be a Jew.

“*Show me the coin for the tax,*” He says, “*Whose likeness and inscription is this?*”
 And looking at the Denarius—about a day’s wage—they say, “*Caesar’s.*”
 Then He says,
 “*Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.*” (22:21)

This isn’t about taxes—it’s about faces.
 Whatever bears Caesar’s face, should be given back to him...
 And whatever bears God’s *face*—well, that, too, should be given back to Him.

The word for *likeness* is literally “*icon,*” or “*image,*”
 as in Genesis 1:26, “*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.*”

This isn’t just a statement about original righteousness, a sharing in the qualities of what God is like. There’s something about our face that continues to bear His image, even after the fall.

Here, Jesus points to their image-bearing-mugs and reminds them that *they* belong to God. Therefore, give to God your very self, your family, your neighbor, even your enemy—
 whoever bears the image of God belongs to God, and that includes *you*.

Even more striking, though, is that this whole conversation takes place face-to-face with Jesus. Who, as St. Paul taught the Colossians,
 “*is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.*” (Col 1:15)
 And to the Hebrews it says,
 “*He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.*” (Heb 1:3)

So, while they’re trying to *trap* Jesus,
 categorizing Him as just another renegade, or revolutionary, or heretic;
 they should’ve been looking into His face, and thereby seeing God Himself.

And when it comes down to it, so should we.

When we look into one another's face, do we realize we're looking at the image of God?
All of humanity bears His image—albeit imperfectly with the fall.

It's no wonder, then, that Jesus looks like one of us;
but the reality is, in fact, that we look like Him.
We were made in *His* image, not He in ours.

“*And we all,*” as St. Paul says to the Corinthians,
“*with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord,*
are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” (2 Cor 3:18)

When Jesus asked for the Denarius, He asked whose image *and inscription* was on it.

That word “*inscription,*” appears also at the end of Mark's Gospel,
when an inscription is placed upon the cross:
“*The King of the Jews*” (Mk 15:26).

There we see Jesus practicing what He preaches, best.
There the image and inscription of God are given back to God.
There is the self-donation of God, the self-sacrifice and whole burnt offering.

And there, more than anywhere else, we realize that it's not about taxes.
For His Kingdom is not of this world.
Those who bear His image are to be given back to Him.
And the baptized, who have been inscribed with His name, they are to return to Him as well.
For our faces are given to behold the glory of God in Christ Jesus;
and as such, are to be given back to Him in lives of thanks and praise,
offering our bodies as living sacrifices,
all for the sake of our neighbor,
who likewise bears in his face the image of God.

“*When they heard it, they marveled.*” (Mt 22:22)

And so should we.

For this means that not only are we given access to the face of God,
but that God in Christ looks us face-to-face,
and rather than judging us for the sinners we are,
He gives us more and more to be like Him in His glory.

Thanks be to God!

In the name of the Father, and of the T Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.