

## **“Whose Image Are You Reflecting?”**

I Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might see you so clearly  
we cannot help but reflect your compassion and mercy in our world. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Let's begin this morning with a little fact-checking. There are some claims we've been making on the internet and other places, and while I'm a little nervous to test them, it's probably better to just know. Would you raise your hand if you believe our church has a sense of humor? (To be clear, it doesn't have to be a good sense of humor.) Okay, now raise your hand if you think God has a sense of humor. And I will remind you about penguins and platypuses, in case that helps.

There is actually a question about this issue on our new website's "Things To Know" page, and the answer includes the assertion that "even the scriptures contain moments inviting us to laugh." This may not be the first thing you would expect me to bring up when the gospel reading is about taxes, but there you go! Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees and Herodians here in Matthew 22 isn't the most hilarious thing he did, but I would argue that it wouldn't have been possible without a sense of humor. Humor isn't just about cracking jokes. It's about shifting our perspective and seeing things in a new way. And as Jesus knows, humor is one of the most effective tools we have when it comes to confronting hypocrisy.

Here's what we need to know about the details of this situation to fully understand what's going on. The Pharisees were a sect of super-pious Jews, who devoted themselves to studying Jewish law in minute detail and generally would have claimed that things like paying taxes to the emperor were outside the law. What's interesting is that when they came to confront Jesus on this question about taxes, they brought some Herodians with them. The Herodians, as their name implies, were much more friendly to the structures of the empire and quite possibly might have hastened Jesus' arrest if he had openly come out against paying taxes to the emperor. So they've set up a trap, and Jesus knows it. If he answers the question, one group or the other is going to come after him. (As if they aren't already!)

And that's when Jesus employs the full toolchest of humor to great effect. First of all, he rejects the premise of the set-up and unmask the powerful by asking to see the coin they would use to pay the tax. It's not absolutely clear, but since the Pharisees were the ones pushing the action here, it's implied that they are the ones who provided the denarius with Caesar's face on it. The fact that they had it at all reveals that they weren't as doctrinally pure as they claimed to be, presumably because in this particular case, it would be dangerous to their existence. And then Jesus takes the whole conversation to a much deeper level by answering them with what is basically a riddle. "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Boom. He has stumped them, with a response that will inspire questioning and commentary for centuries.

The tools of humor, when deftly employed are a useful aid in our quest for faithfulness. But in this story, they are just the beginning, the way to open a door to the deeper questions we must address. For we, too, live in the grip of empire, even if it grasps us in different ways than those living in occupied lands. What are the parts of our lives that bear the image of empire, and what parts of our lives are reflecting the image of God?

At the most basic level, the answer to this riddle is what the psalmist has long proclaimed: “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.” Jesus isn’t answering an “either/or” question. He’s saying “yes, and...” He’s pointing out that Caesar and taxes and coins and graven images all exist on a plane that is but a passing moment to the living God. The things of God are eternal, things like compassion and mercy and creativity. These things are what make up the likeness of God we are called to reflect into the world.

I want us to focus on this today because I believe the world urgently needs us to reflect the likeness of God as clearly as we can. We are surrounded by, we are living with such incredible brokenness. Times are hard. War has broken out all over the world, and it’s not staying within any borders. Authoritarianism is on the rise. Our government is on the verge of a shut-down (again) and can’t get its act together to even function. For some of us, aging is wreaking havoc with our lifestyles and our sense of who we are. We’ve just lived through the hottest summer on record, and the scientists tell us it was likely the coolest one we’ll have had going forward. The

hassles of health insurance and housing and yes, taxes, wear down our humanity. And our humanity is where the image of God is engraved.

Paul and his colleagues wrote to the Thessalonians and commended them for their faithfulness. Everyone is talking about it, they seem to say, because the Thessalonians are bearing the image of God in ways that are impossible to miss. “Your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope” are an inspiration Paul tells them. It is clear they have turned away from idols. They are not bearing the likeness of the empire; rather “the word of the Lord has sounded forth” from them. Sometimes you’ll hear people ask, “If you were to be put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” It’s a bit over-wrought as a rhetorical device, but it does give me pause. Jesus rejected the premises of empire, flipped them around and dug deeper, to reveal the hypocrisy of those who claim purity while enabling continued exploitation of the poor and vulnerable. Are we following him in that pursuit of righteousness?

The world urgently needs us to be reflecting the image of the God of compassion and mercy and welcome. Jesus isn’t saying that money doesn’t matter in this story. Pastor Richard Hong recently shared this salient quote: “A lot of church folks believe that the opposite of consumerism is asceticism. I think that’s completely off-base. Jesus turned the water into the finest wine at the wedding in Cana. The opposite of consumerism is hospitality. Consumerism is wanting the best for me; hospitality is wanting to offer the best to you.”

We are all struggling right now. The world is a lot. Everything feels heavy. And it's not showing any signs up letting up. Back when I was first starting out as a pastor, I read a piece about "peak oil," and how the world fighting over that diminishing resource was going to make things harder. I concluded that my generation of pastors was going to have to develop a theology to help our society deal with an era when it's getting worse before it's getting better. We were wrong about "peak oil" being the cause, but the underlying need is still there. This is an era for "girding our loins," or as modern parlance might put it, "putting on our big-girl pants." We have big challenges to address and not a lot of evidence pointing toward any of them being "fixable" in our lifetimes.

Much as that sounds like we need to get tougher, Jesus shows us that what it really means is that we need to cultivate compassion and tenderness and creativity, and yes, laughter. We face hard times by doubling down, not on human striving, but on reflecting the image of God. For me, that means trying my best to slow down, to pause and breathe when I'm tempted to judge, to remind myself continually that all of us creatures are doing our best under very trying circumstances. It means rejecting any premise that assumes a "zero-sum" game or insists that some lives matter more than others. It means asking creative questions instead trying to live in a black-and-white, yes or no, either/or world. It means grounding ourselves in compassion and gratitude and mercy, rather than wallowing in resentment or jealousy or ginning up fears and hatred.

I would like for our community to know that this is a church that laughs. I would also like for them to know that this is a place of love and welcome, a place where no one is assessed by their tax return or their diploma, a place where creativity is valued as the gift from God that it is, a place where questions are often answered with more questions, because answers can't fully contain our faith. What aspects of the image of God are you trying to reflect to your family and neighbors and friends? What helps you do that? How can we practice all this together, so that the insidious images of empire are less likely to slip into the picture? How can we continue to dig deeper into the wells of compassion and mercy, so that the image of God shines bright from this corner? There are so many ways we can work on this, from Disciples Class, to Welcome Saturday, to choir, to good stewardship, to coffee hour, and on and on. I'm grateful to be on the journey with you, laughing and crying along the way. I hope you'll keep coming along. Hallelujah and Amen.