

What's in Your Pocket?

October 22, 2017

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

20th Sunday after Pentecost

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Many years ago ... when I taught elementary Sunday School classes ... during that first class each September ... I would ask the kids to take out the Crayolas and a sheet of paper ... and draw a picture ... a picture of what they thought God looked like.

Now these drawings were always interesting. And ... as expected ... most of the kids drew a picture that looked a lot like Santa Claus ... minus the red attire and the rosy cheeks. There on their paper would appear a drawing of a very old man ... complete with white hair and a beard.

But each year there were also some surprises ... a few kids would draw something else. One year a student drew a rainbow and called it God ... and another time ... a student drew a young God ... riding a Harley ... a drawing that looked a lot like Evel Knievel ... performing one of his stunts.

My purpose for having the kids take the time to do the drawing ... to take the time to think about their ideas about God ... was so we could begin a conversation on metaphors for God ... on ways to speak of God.

I wanted them to have lots of words ... lots of ways ... to think about God. So that they could see God in nature ... or perhaps in a rainbow ... or a rock ... or maybe even as a very intent and active, risk-taking God riding a Harley.

I wanted them to open their minds to possibilities ... so that eventually ... eventually ... they might even see a bit of God in each other.

Well this morning ... the apostle Paul has taken out his Crayolas and a sheet of paper ... and draws for us a picture of what God looks like.

In this first of his letters to the church at Thessalonica ... which is, most scholars believe, the oldest piece of writing we have in the New Testament ... older than any of our four gospels ... Paul tells the good folks that a church filled with — and led by — the Holy Spirit ... a church like they had become ... is the very image of God ... this church of tough-minded Christians who had put aside their own agendas ... and had taken up the way of Jesus ... for the long haul.

In other words ... the Apostle Paul is saying that *they* are what God looks like in the world. And yet ... if Paul actually had drawn them ... if he had actually left us a picture ... they would probably look a lot like you and me ... just regular, ordinary people.

Because they were just regular, ordinary people ... living in the Roman city of Thessalonica 2,000 years ago ... living in a time and place where fringe movements like theirs ... movements that quietly undermined the way of the Empire that was Rome ... were not welcomed.

They were just regular people ... who chose every day to live the way of Jesus ... chose to live good lives ... sharing what they had with each other ... imitating the goodness of God.

And they did that ... even though it meant they would live with opposition and ridicule and even

persecution ... because they were living in a culture that said Caesar was lord ... and not some Jewish teacher who had ... after all ... been executed by that same Empire.

And so Paul praises them in this letter ... because they were people who labored in love with steadfast hope ... even in the midst of a world that called them crazy and wrong. They were people who shared what they had learned from Paul and the other apostles ... not through words only or primarily ... but through the way they lived their everyday lives ... the choices they made ... one day at a time.

That is the church Paul is praising in this letter Lois read for us ... this is the church Paul is thanking God for ... in his prayers. Not a church that just preached the Gospel effectively ... but a church that lived the Gospel daily.

As a former seminary professor, Dr. Sondra Wheeler, writes in her book, *The Minister as Moral Theologian* ... “we are characters who develop and grow over time ... and so we have to pay attention to who it is we are becoming ... to how we are being formed — or deformed — by the characters we admire ... the models we imitate ... and the practices we adopt. All of this,” she continues, “draws our attention to the most enduring product of our moral existence ... the selves we become in the process.”

So how do we get there ... how do we become a moral person ... walking the way of Jesus?

Well the apostle Paul and Dr. Wheeler agree ... we get there by being formed and taught in a good community ... a community inhabited by persons of virtue ... or as Paul says ... in a church that is truly being church.

For the past few weeks ... the lectionary has given us stories from Matthew’s gospel telling us of Jesus’ conflicted encounters with the religious leaders during what we call Holy Week ... following his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and the turning over of the money changers’ tables in the Temple ... action Jesus took that challenged both the political and the religious powers of his day.

Today... those same religious leaders are again asking Jesus a question ... a specific question ... about whether it was lawful for Jews to pay the imperial tax ... the tax that supported the Romans as they occupied Palestine.

Now these religious leaders weren’t really looking for information when they came to Jesus with their question ... instead they were trying to entrap him the text tells us ... because they had already decided he was a threat and needed to be dealt with.

So they try to entrap him ... to get him into trouble by tempting him to make a either a public statement that Jews shouldn’t pay the tax ... which would cause the authorities to come down on his head ... or to say the Jews should pay the tax ... which would alienate his own oppressed people.

But Jesus was way smarter than they were ... and he was aware of their malice ... and so he answered their political question with a question of his own: “Does anyone have a coin of the empire?” ... the coin that was needed to pay the imperial tax ... and one of them reached deep into his pocket and handed Jesus a coin.

And like all Roman coins ... this coin had a picture of Caesar along with an engraved confession that claimed Caesar was divine.

Now Jesus and all those religious leaders knew that any Jew possessing such a coin has already broken the first two commandments of Torah ... and that's when Jesus knew he had them ... and so he responded: "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's ... and to God the things that are God's."

Jesus allows room for loyalty to Caesar ... but he is very clear ... it is to be a loyalty subordinate to our loyalty to God.

In other words ... this is Caesar's coin you are carrying around in your pocket ... so give it to him ... but be very careful that you don't give to Caesar what actually belongs to God.

And so our questions this morning might be these ... what part of our lives belong to God? What things do we need to dig out of our pockets ... that carry a commitment to something greater than our commitment to God? To whom do we give ultimate allegiance?

This morning ... Jesus is getting political ... but not by asking us to be a Democrat or a Republican or an Independent or a Libertarian. Rather ... he is asking us to get political by making sure we are standing on God's side ... by putting God first in our lives.

The trouble is ... Jesus' answer to the question posed by the religious leaders leaves us with a lot of wiggle room ... leaves us in a state of tension ... because he does not give us specific answers to our specific questions ... rather he leaves us in that tension of figuring it out. What does it mean to put God first ... how do we empty our pockets of all that belongs to Empire?

Jesus doesn't offer any further explanation of that truth ... he doesn't unpack his response ... he doesn't define what it is that belongs to Empire or to Caesar ... and what it is that belongs to God.

Perhaps because Jesus was wise enough to know that Caesar's name changes ... Empire's tactics adapt ... and so we ... especially we who call ourselves church some 2,000 years later ... we would need to do that work of discernment for ourselves.

These religious leaders had no interest in trying to understand Jesus' message ... they were temple leaders, after all, who were in collaboration with Rome ... and that ensured that their lives would be comfortable and secure. They certainly didn't want some Jewish peasant messing that up for them.

But we, on the other hand ... we really do want to understand ... because we want to truly be church ... to follow the way of Jesus. We would like the apostle Paul to write a letter to us ... would like our letter to also say ... "We always give thanks to God for you ... you have turned from idols ... and serve a living and true God."

We want to be as the church father John Calvin once wrote: "a place where God may be able to behold God's self ... as if looking in a mirror."

And so if we as church are going to "walk the talk" in our time ... if we are going to be what God looks like in the world ... if we are ever going to receive one of those letters from the apostle Paul ... we will have to check our pockets daily ... making sure they are empty of idols ... making sure our allegiance is to God ... when God's ways conflict with the ways of our nation.

One evening last week I was listening to the evening news ... and the retired four-star General John Kelly ... who is now Mr. Trump's Chief of Staff ... was defending Mr. Trump's call to the wife of one of the troops killed in Africa two weeks ago.

Now of course I had been living with today's lectionary text in my head all week ... but as I listened to General Kelly ... alarm bells began to go off. He was using religious language to talk about our nation's military ... he was saying that those who died for our nation had given the greatest sacrifice of all ... and that they were the best 1% of Americans ... that he pitied those of us who had never served.

When a journalist later learned that some of General Kelly's remarks were not true ... and raised that issue with the White House Press Secretary ... they were told it was inappropriate to question a four-star general.

Thankfully the next day ... some senators reminded all of us that this was America ... and that it was appropriate.

All of this is to say ... that we must be vigilant in our own lives ... and in the life of our nation ... that we don't put anything above our loyalty to God ... that God is first in our lives ... not our nation's military.

Folks ... that is civil religion ... that is not following the way of Jesus.

We may not always agree on how to put God first in our lives ... for example does kneeling during the National Anthem to protest racism put God first? Can we support the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? Should the use of marijuana be decriminalized? Do we need to push for laws limiting access to guns? How about the abortion debate?

But there is one thing we should be able to agree on ... if we are going to be a moral community ... if we are going to clear our pockets of idol allegiance to Empire or anything else ... if we are going to put God first in our lives.

And that is that we must let love lead the way in our discernment.

We cannot sidestep humility ... we cannot forgo truth telling ... we cannot oppress any person ... we cannot accept greed ... we cannot hate our neighbor ... and we cannot allow civil religion to take the place of worshiping God.

Because friends ... just as every Roman coin was marked with an inscription of divinity by the Empire ... every human life is marked with an inscription placed there by the living God.

That is why our first and highest allegiance should be to that same God. Amen.