

Texts: Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96:1-13; 1 Thessalonian 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

Take a moment right now to take a coin or a bill out of your wallet. Let's take a good look at our money this morning. What does our money tell us about who we are?

There are words printed or inscribed on that money. The word "Liberty" is stamped on our coins, along with the words "E Pluribus Unum," Latin words that mean "out of many, one." They are words that proclaim the aspirations we have for this nation of ours. Every coin and bill contains the words "United States of America", representing the government that prints and mints this money. Also printed on every coin and bill is the face of a former President, the founders and shapers and leaders of our democracy.

Paper money carries this statement: "This note is legal tender for all debts, public and private." You can use that dollar to buy a cup of coffee, or your groceries, or to pay your rent or mortgage, or to pay your taxes. And every coin and bill tells us how much it is worth. We are confident that if it says 25 cents or \$1 dollar or \$50 dollars, we can purchase goods and services equal to that amount. That's a lot of faith to place in a piece of paper or a piece of metal.

Finally, there's a theological statement imprinted on every coin and bill: "In God We Trust." But sometimes I wonder whether we really believe that. Some people believe that the more of these dollars you have in your possession, the more God has blessed you. Some people believe that possession of these dollars is their highest purpose in their life, and everything they do is focused on getting more and more dollars. Some people believe that you are defined by what you can purchase with these dollars, and that the more expensive things you can buy, the greater your own face value.

Money has so many things to tell us, doesn't it?

In this morning's gospel, Jesus is once again approached by a group of religious leaders who want to try to trap him. They begin with flattery – “We know you are sincere,” they say in their insincerity. And then they move to a question: Tell us, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” It's a trick question, and they all know it. If Jesus says “yes,” then they can claim that he is a sellout to the Roman Empire. If he says “no,” then they can claim that he is inciting rebellion against the Roman Empire.

But Jesus, as usual, answers the question with a question of his own. “Show me the coin. Whose head is this, and whose title?” At the time that Jesus was alive, the face of Tiberius, the son of Augustus Caesar, was imprinted on the Roman denarius coin. It is also likely that there was also a theological statement inscribed on the coin – the words “Son of God.” For a Jew to carry around a coin that bore that image and those words would be breaking the first two commandments, namely claiming that anything other than God was divine, and making an image of that supposed divinity. To carry a Roman coin was idolatry to the extreme.

So the question of whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the Roman emperor is vastly different from any question we might have about paying taxes in the United States. Jesus was born into a society under Roman occupation and Roman oppression. Rome exacted taxes from the lands that it had conquered. That money paid the soldiers who were stationed there. That money that built roads so that armies could move more easily. That money enriched the Roman elite.

Whose head is this, and whose title? The Greek word that our Bible translates as “head” is the word “*eikon*”, meaning “image.” Whose image is this, and whose title? And that word *eikon* – image – take us back to the very beginning of the Bible, back to the first

chapter of Genesis. Because in the Greek, that is the word that God uses when God says “Let us make humankind in our *image*, according to our likeness...in the *image* of God he created them, male and female he created them.” Unlike the flat, imprinted image of Tiberius Caesar or George Washington appearing all alike on a million coins, you bear the unique image of God in you. The image of God is who you were created to be – your name, your looks, your intelligence, your abilities, your life and livelihood. So let Caesar have those lifeless coins, says Jesus. What looks like Caesar belongs to Caesar. What looks like God belongs to God.

Whose image is this, and whose title? We tend to pay a lot of attention to the titles that other people use to define us: You are what you wear, you are what you eat, you are what you do, you are the company you keep. You are what your money can buy. Too often we live in fear that somehow we won’t have enough, that somehow we won’t be enough. What is it that bears God’s image? Underneath the possessions and the clothes and the job is the mark of the cross of Christ on your forehead, traced there by loving fingers on the day you were baptized. And underneath even that is the precious human being that you are, created in the image of God with the divine spark and breath of the Holy Spirit that gives you life.

In just a few minutes we are going to watch God lay claim to another one of God’s beautiful children. Angeline is here with her mother and her stepfather and friends from Wednesday School. In just a few minutes she is going to be washed clean with water. In just a few minutes the cross of Christ will be marked on her forehead. Her life will belong to Christ. She will belong to God and God will never let her go.

There is one more detail from this gospel passage that I want to highlight: when Jesus answers the Pharisees, he calls them “hypocrites.” That Greek word originally came from the theater. It meant a stage actor, someone who wore a mask and portrayed a character in a play. There are times when we, too, try to wear a mask, try to claim to be other than who God made us to be. Whose image do you bear, and whose title? God created you in the image and likeness of God. God claimed you in your baptism. Your name is Child of God. Your title is Beloved.

This coming week, as you use the cash in your wallet or pocketbook, consider the words and images that are inscribed on your money. Consider whether the way in which you spend your dollars reflects a trust in God’s generosity or not. What does that money tell you about who you are? How does the way in which you spend that dollar make a difference in the lives of others? How does the way in which you spend that dollar reflect the free gift of grace that you have been given?

And this coming week, as you get ready for the day or as you prepare for bed, look in the mirror at your reflection. Whose image do you bear, and whose title? What you see is the image of God reflected in you. What you see is beautiful and beloved. What you see is who God created you to be.

What looks like Caesar belongs to Caesar. What looks like God belongs to God.