



“Whose Image?”

Scripture – Mark 12:13-17

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, September 23, 2018

We are officially – at last – in the fall. But today’s text rushes us ahead to spring and the final week of Jesus’ life. To put it in context, we remember that Jesus entered Jerusalem to the shouts of his followers who cried out “Hosanna!” which does not mean “Praise the Lord” – that would be “Hallelujah.” “Hosanna” means “Save us or Deliver us.” Deliver them from what? The oppression of the Romans that kept them extremely poor and very fearful.

Carried away by their hope of deliverance, the enthusiastic crowd even dared to chant: “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!” Why David? He was the Hebrew people’s mightiest king and most successful military leader. These were provocative words to be overheard by the Roman occupiers.

Following his entry – which some characterize as a parade, but was more akin to a protest march – Jesus immediately climbed the steps to the temple where he scanned the ground. After absorbing the activity in and around the temple, he withdrew. Along with his disciples, Jesus trekked back down the hill on which Jerusalem sits, crossed down into the Kidron Valley, then back up the adjacent hill which is the Mount of Olives.

After weaving their way through the olive grove, they walked down the backside of the mount to Bethany, where they spent the night. The next day, Jesus and his disciples rose early to head back to Jerusalem, a distance of roughly two miles. Along the way they passed a fig tree. Startling his disciples, rather than plucking a fig and biting into it, Jesus cursed the tree. Why?

Thanks to the prophets Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel, and Micah, the fig tree had become a symbol for the Jewish people. Jesus cursed the fig tree because the religious leaders had become corrupt and were leading the people far from God. The following day, when Jesus and the disciples passed by the tree again, it had withered. The symbolism was unmistakable: As a result of duplicitous leaders, the Hebrew people no longer bore fruit for God.

When Jesus and his followers reentered Jerusalem, the religious leaders had Jesus squarely in their sights. They confronted him and demanded that he explain what gave him the authority to challenge their leadership and turn people against them. Jesus refused to answer directly. Instead, he told the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, the point of which is to indict the religious leaders as enemies of God for opposing Jesus.

These men were incensed and might have mauled him on the spot, were it not for the imposing crowd that had gravitated to Jesus. The leaders retreated and plotted their strategy. Rather than brutalize Jesus, they hatched a scheme which would either undermine his credibility with his followers or definitively expose him as an enemy

of the Roman Empire. Either way, they would manipulate others to rid them of their problem. Their scheme is what we heard in today's scripture reading.

The adversaries of Jesus assemble a posse of strange bedfellows: Pharisees and Herodians. The Pharisees were devout Jews who ordered their lives strictly according to the Torah. The Herodians were turncoats who had aligned themselves with Herod who ruled the region for the Romans. The only thing that drew them together was their common enemy: Jesus.

This cohort of Pharisees and Herodians confront him. They begin by reminding everyone within earshot that Jesus never bends his teaching to curry favor with his audience. His only compass is God's truth, and if what he says offends, then so be it.

Having reminded both Jesus and the crowd of his reputation, they pose a straight forward question that is loaded with dynamite. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

To understand why this question is packed with explosives, it is essential to know that 90% of the people living in Palestine were relegated to poverty by crushing taxes. The tax paid to Rome not only insured their pitiful standard of living, but their money enriched the lives of Romans and paid for the very army that occupied their land. As if that were not enough, the Jews were required to pay this tax with a silver coin that had the emperor's image engraved on it – a violation of the command to make no graven images. The questioners – who believe they are on the verge of eliminating their problem – ask Jesus: "Should we pay the Romans, or should we not?"

They hope Jesus will say, "Not on your life!" If he does, the Herodians will pounce and drag him off to Herod who would be eager to make an example of Jesus for anyone else who might consider not paying the tax.

But even if Jesus acquiesces and says they must pay the tax, the Pharisees will claim victory, because he will deflate his followers who despise the tax and expect him to stand up against the Romans.

Jesus appears to be trapped in an inescapable position. But in a Houdini-like move, Jesus slipped from their grasp and landed in a position stronger than before. Jesus responded with precise wording that thwarted his adversaries while elevating his popular support. "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

The Herodians slumped. They clearly heard him say, "Give to the emperor the things that belong to him." Jesus failed to promote a tax revolt. Then, why were his followers grinning?

The Pharisees knew exactly what the smiles meant. Both his followers and the Pharisees heard Jesus say, "Give to God the things that are God's," and both groups knew that *everything* belongs to God. God is the Creator of heaven and earth, and they could recite the 24th Psalm by heart: "The earth is the Lord's and *all* that is in it."

The Pharisees realized that their meticulously devised trap turned out to be the trick cigar that exploded in their faces. Humiliated, they dropped their heads and shuffled away.

Jesus had cleverly diffused a potential disaster, and in the process reminded his followers that everything – including our very being – belong to God. Thus, our lives and all we have are gifts. It's all blessing.

Poet and author, James Autry, tells of an experience that became an awakening for him. His health was failing. His arteries were blocked and he needed heart bypass surgery. On hearing the news, some of his friends told him that it would be a life-changing experience. It would transform him into a more spiritual person.

He was skeptical and wrote, “In other words, the doctors would stop my heart, re-route some arteries, and re-start a man more aware of his mortality and more inspired to see himself on a path to heaven in the time between the trial run at death and the real thing.”

He scoffed at the idea and said his focus was simply on surviving the ordeal and returning to a life that was already balanced, grounded and happy; a life of loving family and friends, of meaningful work and boundless opportunities. So after five rough days in the hospital, he returned home with no thought of having been at death’s door or of somehow being changed.

But something happened. Something that was difficult to put into words. He experienced some mysterious sensations. One afternoon he awoke from a nap and found everything around him transformed. The afternoon light was shining into the room and catching the flowers friends had sent him in a way that intensified their colors. The room glowed. He said that he had looked across this room a thousand times, but he had never seen this glow. The next day when Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony came on, the music – like the light the day before – was richer and more intense. He did not simply hear it; he felt it deep within himself.

Later, he wrote, “Coming face to face with my own mortality lifted the veil. It made vivid the sacred hues and notes that had surrounded me unnoticed for years...I felt connected with something much greater than myself, with light and music as forces beyond how we usually identify them. They seemed like manifestations of God. I was suddenly feeling so grateful.” He added, “If the doctors had to cut me open for this, it was worth it.”¹

When we grasp in our soul that life is a gift from God, gratitude wells within us. We become grateful for a loving family and true friends, for good health and an amazing planet, for beauty and wonder, for music and laughter, for opportunities to lift the lives of others and to play a part in transforming the world.

In order to be successful at something, you need discipline. To succeed in school, you need to discipline yourself to study, to listen to your instructor, to read the necessary material, and to turn in your work on time. To succeed in athletics, you need to discipline yourself to run when you do not feel like it, to lift weights on a regimented schedule, and to eat the right foods but not too much. To be successful in a career, you need to discipline yourself to be at work on time, to know as much as you can about your field, to acquire new skills, and to work extra hours. In order to excel, you need discipline.

Why wouldn’t the same be true of a spiritual life? To become a faithful follower of Christ, you need to acquire certain disciplines – worshiping regularly, praying, reading scripture, serving the needs of others, and giving financially to the church.

Money is one of the most powerful forces in the world. That is why there are more verses in the gospels about money than prayer. Jesus knew that our wealth influences not only how we live, but the kind of person we become.

It is essential that you and I give a portion of our money to the church because it is a way of thanking God for the blessings of life.

It is essential that you and I give a portion of our money to the church because God calls us to become partners in transforming the world.

It is essential that you and I give a portion of our money to the church because it will save our souls.

Money is constantly trying to define our worth and our place in the world. Giving a portion of our money to the church is an act of resistance to declare that we control our money and not the other way around.

Have you heard whispers in your soul urging you to make changes that will put you more in harmony with the way of Christ? Is God urging you to commit to making changes in your priorities so that Christian values really are at the top and have not slipped down to level four or five? Could God be nudging you to rethink your spending habits and how you use your money?

Westminster is beginning the annual Stewardship campaign when all of us are asked to make a financial commitment to the church for the coming year. Through worship, music, mission, classes, programs for children and youth, we touch so many lives.

When you receive a pledge card, do not merely ask yourself: How much will I give? Ask yourself what kind of person do I intend to be?

NOTES

1. Agnes Norfleet, "Called to be Generous," September 24, 2017, quoting from James Autry's book, *Looking Around for God*.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Loving God, why does life yank us in so many different directions? Why are there so many demands, temptations, challenges and opportunities? We find that we often struggle to determine which path we should take. Enable us to distinguish your claim amidst the many other claims that vie for our attention. Grant us the determination to place our loyalty in you and the wisdom to follow the path of Jesus.

God, we admit to you that we have a problem regarding our wealth and possessions. Most of us think in terms of scarcity and do not fully appreciate all that we have. We act as if we must continue to accumulate until we feel we have sufficient wealth before we become generous.

Our culture constantly blares a message of scarcity, telling us that we are incomplete and what we have is out of date. We hear the lie that if we will purchase a new car, new jewelry, new clothes, new phones, new electronic gadgets, we can buy happiness. Sadly, we are tempted to believe that consumption will bring satisfaction and that material wealth is the way to create a good life.

Living Lord, Christ has taught us that life is not defined by what we own. He has warned us to be on guard against greed and the lure of false promises. He has warned us about storing up treasures for ourselves, but not being rich toward you.

Help us to remember that all of life is a gift. We come into this world with nothing and we will depart with nothing. Remind us that we make our lives rich when we share our riches. We treasure our lives when we do not hoard our treasures.

Create in us hearts of gratitude so that we may become worthy stewards of all we have. Help us to experience the deep satisfaction of being unselfish and the marvelous joy of being generous.

Now, hear us as we pray the prayer Christ taught us to pray together, saying, **"Our Father..."**