

Sunday, October 22, 2017

Exodus 33:12-23

I Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

Made in God's Image

As we continue to learn what it means to serve God faithfully with hope and praise we need to understand a little bit about from where we came and who we are today. Just for a moment think about yourself- who are you really? Many people might respond to this question by saying the job they do to earn money to live. Some might answer I am a wife/ husband, parent, grandparent, aunt/uncle showing their relationship to others. Still others might go from a physical perspective and describe themselves as feeling pretty good but refer to physical pain or inabilities. But have you ever described yourself as God sees you? That is, from God's perspective—you are a child in faith, striving to grow in understanding; you are new to faith, you have much experience in the church, you know who you are and how you relate to Jesus. You are faithful to serve others but not sure if you are growing in faith. You come to church but not sure if you are Christian but like the people and what they do. You are searching for God and are beginning to see his glory and what this means in your life. Just who are you and from where have you come?

In continuing to read the story of Moses as he leads the former slaves of Egypt through a journey in the desert to the Promised Land we realize that this is a story of faith lost and found through the generations of people. It seemed that the people grumbled and complained a lot until they saw proof that God was really with them. They complained that there was no food- God provided manna and quail; there was no water- God provided water from a rock; and they were unsure of how to live. But it is while Moses is receiving the teachings from God that they build a golden idol- showing their turning away from God. And it is our passage today when we realize that Moses is speaking with God and learning more about his glory that the people are living again the way of God. Moses is up in the mountain and talking with God; he is witnessing God's glory. God says, "My presence will go with you and I will give you rest."

We learn later in the passage that when he returns to the valley below, his face became radiant- so bright that he needed to put on a veil. It is when he is seen by the people again that they believe that God is with them and soon they will enter the Land. But in order to inherit the land, they must learn how to live according to God. But how did they understand the opposite? From where did they learn not to be as God wanted them to be? How did the outside societal influence of what they had experienced in Egypt play such a strong role in their lives? Did they

see themselves as changed from slave to privileged? From where did they get the authority to question Moses regarding this whole experience?

Jesus is teaching people in the synagogue and the Pharisees in the synagogue were trying to trap him in his words to see where his authority really was and how they could stop him from getting the people to listen to his ideas. They wanted to see what he would say with regard to the taxes that everyone paid. So one asks Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Jesus knew that they were evil in their intent and even responded with "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?"

Jesus knew that everyone listening to him had to pay taxes—Jewish people had to pay Temple taxes, as well as customs taxes, and taxes on land. These people were not questioning taxation in general but a specific annual tribute tax which was paid to Rome who occupied the Holy Land and worshiped false gods. This tax could only be paid with Roman coins. Temple authorities had chosen to collaborate with Rome and endorsed this tax so that they too might profit from it. The Jews had to pay it or they found themselves in trouble.

Jesus knew that this was a trap. If he answered Yes this would have discredited him with those who found the imperial domination system reprehensible and unacceptable. If he answered "No" he would have been arrested for troublemaking and telling his listeners not to obey the tax laws. So Jesus makes two moves. He asked his questioner for a coin. When they show it, Jesus looked at it and asked, "Whose image/ portrait is on it? Whose inscription is this?"

It was an image of Caesar. And so Jesus states, "Render/ Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." They were amazed at his response and left him there. What had Jesus said? It's Caesar's coin- go ahead and give it back to him." But Jesus doesn't stop with Caesar's coin—he also states, "Give back to God what belongs to God."

Over the centuries, many Christians have based their attitudes toward government on this passage. Some have thought that Jesus' statement establishes two separate realms, Caesar's and God's or state and church and that people should render to each what they ask for in their respective realms. But this leads us to a huge question: What belongs to Caesar, and what belongs to God? One popular way of looking at it is the separation of church and state: "Pay your tribute tax to Caesar -or your tax to the government, and pay your temple tax to God. In other words, good Christians share their gifts just as they pay the government what is required. Yet is this what Jesus is really saying?

What belongs to God, and what belongs to Caesar? What should be the attitude of Christians toward political systems whether ancient or modern? The Herodians and Pharisees had every intention to ensnare Jesus and planned to kill him eventually. But the answer that Jesus offers leaves us to figure out is, what are we to give back? This giving back carries the sense of giving that which already belongs to the other.

So what does belong to Caesar? Whose image/portrait is on the coin? Caesar. Therefore the things that belong to Caesar have his very identifiable sign. As an example, we stand for "O Canada" and we look at the maple leaf on our flag as important to our identification as Canadian. We know what it means to be Canadian- with our likes, dislikes and even our history.

But how do we know what things belong to God? They have God's image on them as well! The word for "image" was used in Genesis 1:26-27 when God said, "Let us make humankind in our *image*, according to our likeness; . . . So God created humankind in his *image*, in the *image* of God he created them; male and female he created them. Again in Genesis 5:1 we read "This is the list of the descendants of Adam. When God created humankind, he made them in the *likeness* of God." As well as Gen 9:6: ". . . for in his own *image* God made humankind."

We are to give to God the things stamped with God's image -- us! We are to give God ourselves -- our whole selves -- not just some part.

How is it with you? You may think you give God your mind, but your heart is far from him. Or maybe you believe in God and have given Him a place in your heart, but you are unwilling to learn about God- Jesus- or Spirit from his Word. You may be willing to give God your energy and effort but remain unwilling to bring your whole being to worship or fellowship or study with other Christians. Maybe you give God 1 or 2 hours a week, but God wants all of you all the time 24/7 every day, every week. We cannot say that "this part belongs to God, so I will give it to God, but this area of my life is none of God's business."

We are created in God's image. We are to give Him our all, because we represent the very nature of God. Everything we are and everything we have belongs to God. Everything we are and everything we have we are to give (back) to God. We are but mere managers or stewards of these gifts God has given to us.

But what does this mean for us if we are made in God's image as individuals and even as a church? Are we reflecting the image of God? Are we using what God gives to us to learn more about Jesus and what he teaches us about the important things in life? Or are we merely existing for ourselves?

What would it look like if we gave our entire being to God? Would our homes take on a special purpose? Would our families learn from each other about unconditional love, understanding and forgiveness in a deeper more meaningful way? Would we use all our material assets to glorify God? And would we really allow God to lead us to live the way he calls us to live and love others?

We are made in God's image just like the people Paul taught at Thessalonica. He heard how they were living and commended them for picking up the task of living as Jesus did. They had heard Paul's teachings about Jesus and so Paul wrote and told them they were doing well. They were reflecting God's image in their daily lives.

God knows you- He loves you and has created you in his image. Are you reflecting his unconditional love for others and for yourself? Are you setting aside time to read your Bible, to reflect on the stories and words of people who struggled just like you? Are you praying and thinking about Jesus' words and how you may know Him as friend and teacher? Are you giving of yourself to others beyond the walls of this building? Just think about the things in your life that God wants you to give back to him. Render unto God that which belongs to God! Choose to follow God and you will grow in hope, peace, love and joy for this is what we are called to do as we serve faithfully in hope and praise. We are created by God's hands. We are made in God's image. And God calls us to reflect his glory through our daily living. Let us remember this as we pray:

Holy God we praise you because we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful. Help us to know our hearts so that we might grow in faith. Hear us O God as we pray to you knowing that we are called to reflect your image of grace, hope and love in all that we do.
SILENCE. AMEN.