

Sermon Preached by the Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
October 22, 2017 Pentecost 20/Proper 24/Year A
Texts – Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

Margaret and I have a friend who lives in Michigan and had never visited Maine until last spring when he came to stay with us for the better part of a week. He was fascinated by many things about the Maine coast, but what intrigued him the most was the way lobsters are caught. The whole process of men and women in small boats baiting hundreds of primitive-looking traps, scattering them about the floors of the harbors and bays, and pulling them up every morning to see what they got – he marveled at it. How “low-tech.” He had never thought about it before. Why would he? He's lived in Michigan his entire life. He knows something about farming. But lobsters never crossed his mind.

Is it too much of a stretch to see the lobster trap as a useful metaphor for today's gospel story? It's intriguing that the Pharisees and the Herodians – not likely allies, by the way – seek to entrap Jesus, not physically in an under-water cage, but verbally in a dilemma. And they want to boil him in his own words. Their bait is an effusive compliment. “We know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.” If their compliment were directed at me, I'd probably turn a little red, smile, say thank you, and then lean closer toward these obviously smart and kind men. “Yes, say more.” Who wouldn't want to hear more from these guys?

Next comes the question. So, given your great sincerity, honesty, intelligence, and passion, we obviously want to hear your wisdom about something that puzzles us. Please tell us, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” You can almost feel the trap's webbing begin to catch hold. If he opposes the tax, he's guilty of advocating sedition against the Roman state. The Herodians, who were puppets of the Romans, would surely call him on that. On the other hand, if he supports paying the tax, he's guilty of blasphemy. The Pharisees would surely call him on that. There's no way out.

So what does Jesus do? He simply refuses the bait. He's not lured by the chum of compliments. He knows who he is, and he does not need these conspirators to feed his ego. So rather than play their little game, he asks for a coin and throws a question back at them. “Whose head and title is on the coin?” Perhaps a better translation is “Whose *image* and title is on the coin?” It was, of course, the emperor's image. But more than that, the coin also included at least an implied connection between the emperor and one or more of the Roman deities.

A first-century Jew observing this whole interaction would immediately get the point. She might think about an early verse from the book of Genesis: “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1: 27). It doesn't matter whose image is on the coin. What matters is whose image is in us. And Jesus' inquisitors go away, bested once again.

This has nothing to do with whether or not we should pay taxes to the government. Sure, we can debate about the tax code, about what is a just tax policy. That's an important conversation for every responsible citizen to engage, including Christians. And of course it's

one that is reflected in the news right now, as Congress and the President begin to take up the issue. But that's not Jesus' concern here.

It's not about whether or how much money, with the image of the bald eagle on it, we give back to the government. It's about whether we give ourselves, with the image of God in us, back to God. To whom do we belong? Whose image is inscribed in us? For Jesus, and for us, the answer is clear.

I don't think it's an accident that the framers of the lectionary had this passage come up in the middle of the fall, the time of year when churches all over the land are gearing up for their annual pledge drives. I think the passage gets our thinking about stewardship started in the right place.

I've been preaching for over thirty years. And over that time, I've given plenty of stewardship sermons. A few frankly have been little more than direct appeals to dig a little deeper than the previous year. Some people respond well to that. They just want to know what the church's needs are. Other sermons have been well thought out attempts to express some elaborate spiritual grounding for stewardship. Some people respond well to that. They need to be inspired by something more than dollars and cents. I often have not felt especially successful in this whole endeavor, in part because I'm a little conflicted about what success might look like. The practical side of me says it's simple. Success is seen in more pledges and more money in the coffers. People like to see that, and often interpret it as a clear sign that things are going well. So more pledges and more money is a measurable sign of stewardship success. That's true, on one level.

But another side of me says it's not that simple. Because faithful Christian stewardship really begins not with attempting to meet the needs of the Church. There's no doubt that meeting those needs is important. But if that's all Christian stewardship is about, then there's little that distinguishes us from any other institution, whether it's the YMCA, Habitat for Humanity, or the Boy Scouts. They're all worthy institutions. But they're not the Body of Christ.

Christian stewardship really begins with a deep awareness of whose image we bear. You and I are made in the image of God. Imagine that! What an awesome thought! What joy! What built-in dignity! What a message to proclaim to those who have been told that they must conform to someone else's image – their boss's, their mother's, their husband's, their government's.

To know that you bear the image of God is to know freedom. And out of that knowledge, a knowledge that is seated in the core of your being, springs forth gratitude.

I invite you to begin your prayerful reflections on stewardship this year right there, with a vision of the image of God that is plainly in you. And let's see what our response looks like when it grows from that fertile place.