

Proper 24 Pent - Year A October 16, 2011 -Isaiah 45:1-7; 96:1-9 (10-13); 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22 Image<sup>i</sup>

Some of you are old enough to remember the movie *Sergeant York* starring Gary Cooper. It was a true story about Alvin York, the back-woods sharpshooter who claimed to be a pacifist and ended up being the most decorated war hero of World War I. His dilemma was that his patriotism and his reverence for the sixth commandment –“Thou shalt not kill” seemed to be at odds with each other.

On the surface, it seems like the Gospel today opens up a discussions about the separation between church and state. Officials from the church, which was at the time of this story (the temple), and the state (the Roman Empire) are identified in this account as asking about taxes. This Gospel is also one that recounts an attempt to trap Jesus into saying something that could be identified as a clear-cut crime. Like many politicians, Jesus never really answers the question he is asked, and the response he gives has more information in it than he was asked.

Let’s take a closer look. Matthew tells us that the Pharisees and the Herodias have banded together to ask about paying taxes. The Pharisees were the officials of the temple and would not profit from taxes. But the Herodias were state officials and would have something to gain from taxes. So why would they come together to ask this particular question of Jesus unless the state officials were conspiring with the temple officials to trap Jesus? This particular challenge would result in someone being unhappy no matter what Jesus answered. And Jesus risked being

accused of treason if he elected to deny that taxes should be paid to the emperor. Although Jesus never really answers the question, he adds an important point we want to consider.

After the officials affirm that Jesus is sincere and teaches in accordance with God's truth without partiality to anyone, they then ask, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Jesus scolds them for testing him and asks them to show him the coin used for the tax. They give him a denarius. He continues in answering their question with another question: "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They responded that the emperor's head appeared on the denarius. So, Jesus answered, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

According to other translations of this Gospel, Jesus did not ask whose "head" appears on the coin but rather, "whose image". But the officials remained on track with their desire to catch Jesus in a treasonous response. They answered that the emperor's image appears on the coin. They missed completely the possibility that Jesus might have been asking them for a less superficial or obvious answer—particularly since his response included the idea that they should give to God what is God's. They did not ask him to make that distinction, so why did he do it?

Jesus asked about image. We know we are made in the image of God. That means everyone is made in the image of God—even the emperor. No matter

whether we are functioning socially, economically, politically, or religiously we are first and foremost children of God made in God's image and therefore we belong to God.

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy have seen that image of God in the people of Thessalonika. In fact, they are quite moved by their experience of evangelizing the Thessalonians. They are moved and transformed by the experience, are changed and evangelized by them.

This isn't the way we usually understand evangelism. We usually think that evangelization mostly involves a giver and a taker but in this instance both parties gave and both received. They each saw that the other was made in the image of God and this brought them together as the body of Christ.

This moving experience is documented in Paul's letter and is one of the earliest records of Christianity. Paul indicates that it is not just the preaching of the Gospel but the power of the Holy Spirit that they shared. Paul and the others may have gone to Thessalonika with the intention of bringing something to them that they did not have before, and the Gospel message may have been exactly that. But what Paul and the others did not expect was that they would encounter God in the midst of the Thessalonians. The Holy Spirit moved them all to be for and to each other a reflection of God.

At the intersection of the Gospel of Matthew and Paul's letter to the Thessalonians we discover how important it is to remember that we are all children of God. When we are aware that we are made in God's image and that everyone we encounter is made in God's image we are closer to understanding that Jesus modeled this for us throughout his life. We may also feel less inclined to separate ourselves from each other. It is equally important that we retain our identity as children of God whether we are functioning as members of our household, our workplace, our neighborhood, or our city.

Sergeant York's struggle was resolved by deciding that "Cesar" was the government that asked for his help in winning a war, and "God" was his guide, the One who would help him decide whether WWI was a just war and whether he could serve his country while living into God's image.

As committed Christians we are also obliged to look into the faces of our neighbors and see God, especially when we are tempted to relegate those neighbors into a category that would put them at odds with us. Imagine how powerfully the Holy Spirit can work with us and through us when we do not separate ourselves from that image. We might experience what the Thessalonians felt and what Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy felt as they evangelized each other. AMEN.

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<sup>i</sup> Reference given to the Rev Debbie Royals