

Identities Grounded In God – Judy Cox

Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

I have a vivid childhood memory of my dad describing a relative as “a true Scandrett!” Which relative I don’t recall—I do remember my burning desire to share that identity, that of a “true Scandrett.” Now older and more discerning, I remember Dad’s smile, and suspect he was joking about our family’s being stubborn, argumentative, longwinded and penny-pinching! (And my nearest and dearest might say some or all of that identity does fit me...)

Who is God in our texts today? When we sit under a collection of Scriptures, it’s not always simple to answer that question. We might see here a God of holiness and power, whom we worship with joy but also awe and trembling. And we also see God open and responsive to our questions, to honest dialogue, but not to manipulation. Most compellingly today, to me, we see God as the very ground of our identity.

In our Old Testament reading we enter an interchange between Moses and God about the shape of Israel’s relationship with God. As Eric reminded us last week, by the idolatry of worshiping the Golden Calf the people have rejected God—have hurt, angered and disillusioned God. Moses has successfully interceded for God to continue in relationship with Israel, but with that betrayal, God’s mind has changed about the shape of their relationship. From earlier in this chapter: *The LORD said to Moses, Go, leave this place, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, ... I will send an angel before you ... but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.* Israel will no longer be accompanied by God’s own presence; instead an escorting messenger or angel will take that place. God will not completely abandon the people—staying true to the covenants with Abraham, and at Sinai—but draws back from being present with them in the way originally promised. The Lord’s abiding, dwelling presence will not go with Israel as they journey.

In our reading for today Moses is not satisfied with this new arrangement. In another remarkable exchange, they’re arguing! Moses boldly calls out God, insisting that the Divine Presence go with them as promised. He’s refusing to let God off the relationship hook. Everett Fox’s translation catches the tone of the exchange: *See, you, you say to me: Bring this people up! But you, you have not let us know whom you will send with me! ... See, this nation is indeed your people!* ... Or as The Message puts it: *Don’t forget, this is your people, your responsibility.* Moses has God’s ear; the LORD concedes a bit. The NRSV reads: *My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.* But that’s adding to the very brief original--there’s no “with you” in verse 14 in Hebrew! It’s more like: *My presence will go, and I will give you rest.*

So Moses isn’t satisfied; he keeps pushing God, like a customer checking out the fine print. He wants promises: *If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I AND your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.* God agrees! Moses is right, the basis of Israel’s identity, their distinctiveness, IS in God, in the presence of God with them! *The Lord said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked...*

More briefly, in our Epistle we hear the Thessalonian church's reputation from Paul. They are known for their *faith in God* and how they *turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven*. Their identity, too, is grounded in God.

We shouldn't be surprised that Jesus, in our Gospel reading, raises the bar even higher. It may not be obvious, at first read, what that means. What is Jesus actually saying to this hostile audience?

Pharisees and Herodians are coming together to trap Jesus. Remember, just verses earlier, when the religious leaders realized his parable of the vineyard owner's two sons, and then the one of the vineyard tenants, were about them? This has become war, and war makes for strange alliances. The Herodians apparently supported the puppet king Herod, whom the occupying Roman Empire had put over Palestine. The Herodians, then, support Rome's right to this "head tax" of a denarius on every person, while the Pharisees oppose it, for multiple reasons. They long for an end to Roman oppression, for a Messiah to set them free of Rome; the "head tax" is especially offensive because it has to be paid with a denarius. This Roman coin had on it an image of the emperor, or Caesar (breaking the 2nd Commandment, You shall not make any graven images). It also had an inscription calling the emperor divine (breaking the 1st Commandment, You shall worship no other gods). It was breaking Torah even to carry this coin! So this is like Nancy Pelosi and Mitch McConnell miraculously joining forces, or odder yet, the Libertarians and the Green Party.

They frame their question to force a no-win outcome with a yes-or-no answer from Jesus—kinda like the no-win set up by the question, "Have you stopped kicking your dog?" In verse 17: *Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?*

Is it lawful...? Umm, whose laws, the Roman Empire's or Israel's? Exactly! Who has ultimate authority here?

This question has high stakes; just a few years previously, when Jesus was a boy, Judas the Galilean had rebelled against this tax, among other oppressions of Rome, and had died with his followers at the hands of Rome. So if Jesus declares himself against the tax, he labels himself a rebel and a "traitor" against Rome, with bloody payback to follow. But if he declares himself for it, for Rome, he betrays oppressed Israel, and certainly can't, after all, be the Messiah his supporters are waiting for!

Jesus, well aware of their malice, says, "*Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.*" And they brought him a denarius. You gotta wonder just whose pocket this coin was in! Their opening words of flattery speak of hypocrisy, but, if a Pharisee carries that coin, their actions shout of it!

Then he said to them, "Whose head [literally, image] is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give [back] therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

I can imagine him sending that coin spinning with a flick of his thumb, and tossing it back—*to the emperor the things that are the emperor's*—and then gesturing around—*and to God the things that are God's*. To the Scripturally illiterate Romans this would have sounded harmless, a separation of the emperor's authority as distinct from God's. However, Jesus is not setting up an equality between the sphere of Empire and the sphere of the Kingdom; the emperor's rights actually dwindle to nothing against the preempting right of God's.

Did you catch why? Those “People of the Book” listening would have understood his reference to Genesis with his question about the image on the coin. There God creates humankind in God's own image. *Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...”* (Genesis 1:26 and following). So if the tossed-back coin of the Empire bears the image of the emperor, what then is the coin, the currency, of the Kingdom of God? What “coin” bears God's image? What then, who then, belongs to God, and is to be given back to God? Every single one of us!

Even early on the Church held this interpretation; Tertullian, in the late 2nd century, says: “That means render the image of Caesar, which is on the coin, to Caesar, and the image of God, which is imprinted on the person, to God. You give to Caesar only money. But to God, give yourself.” And Augustine notes: “The coin has no knowledge of its bearing the image of the prince. But you are the coin of God, and ... know the One whose image you bear.”

I said earlier that Jesus raises the bar higher; do you see that difference between our Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel texts? In all of them, God is the one in Whom our identity is grounded. But the follow-up question, “Who are we, then, in these texts?” changes a bit in the Gospel. It becomes more like, “Who exactly is ‘we’? Who is ‘us’?” That is, in Exodus and Thessalonians, those whose identity is grounded in God are the people of God, and the Christ-followers. Jesus reminds us, though, that the identity of every human being is grounded in God. No inner-circle privilege or superiority, Church! Every fellow human being is created in God's image, a coin of God's, just as much as we are.

And the implications for our lives are huge. How then do we discern how and where the claims of Empire try to compete with, but are preempted by, God's? When does Caesar's “give it back” get overruled by God's? That's not an easy question to answer. I think this perspective, contrasting the different coins of the different reigns, helps. I would suggest that anytime Caesar's actions “deface” or “devalue” the Image-bearing “coin of the Kingdom,” God's claim prevails over Caesar's on us.

Where might today's Empire be devaluing or defacing God's own image on Kingdom currency? No one-size-fits-all answer—we have to wrestle with and discern this, in our contexts, our times, the places where we are placed and called.

For example, almost 40 years ago Myron Augsburger, Mennonite pastor and theologian, stood in his Anabaptist tradition in applying this to a burning issue of the time; he challenged the Church regarding the government's demand for our lives, in a military draft, to destroy our fellow human beings who bear God's image. Likewise, standing proudly against slavery in our own abolitionist heritage as Free Methodists, we discern and call out that devaluing, whether sanctioned by our

own government before our Civil War, or by other governments, with human trafficking. It's clearer where God's call on us overrules Caesar's at a distance, whether in time or in space! It might not be so easy in our own particular here and now. What does God demand of us when our Empire redefines people without immigration documents as "illegals," and threatens deportation of those it earlier assured of their security? Is this not a devaluing and defacing of the Image-bearing coin of the Kingdom? Is there a need for a sanctuary church in Greenville, as our Mission Team Coordinators have been wondering?

We live in a town with a Federal Correctional Institution. Now I'm no statistician, but I can research statistics and the statistical techniques behind them. Recent Federal Bureau of Prisons¹² and U.S. Census Bureau statistics³ together seem to show people of color 91% more likely to be incarcerated in Federal institutions than whites, and Hispanics 85% more likely than non-Hispanics. What then is God's call on us in this town? Can we somehow strengthen the value of our local Image-bearing coins of God's Kingdom here at the Greenville FCI—act to stabilize the currency, if you will?

Our self-reported local government statistics, published online by the State of Illinois, show that minority drivers are 69% more likely than whites to experience a traffic stop in our county, almost twice as often.⁴ Is this not a specific devaluing of Kingdom currency in our own particular here and now by Caesar? How might God be calling us to support and stabilize God's devalued currency here in Bond County?

These are questions haunting me; how do your own burden you? Your hearts will be struggling with other situations where you see a competing claim.

How do we discern God's call on us, how to live out the priority of God's Kingdom over Caesar's? We can only discern it together! To quote Suzanne Farnham (et al.) from Listening Hearts: "Although God calls each of us personally, as individuals we see only partially. Individual perception, reasoning and understanding are always limited. ... Something happens to us when we consult one another in Christian community. In sharing our thoughts with others, surprising insights often emerge—opening our eyes to what we have not seen."

So we continue to pray together as we seek to discern God's leading. We Free Methodists are blessed with a polity that requires community action and corporate identity in our Society Meetings. And it's with a strong sense of the Providence of God in this timing that I announce and invite you to a St. Paul's Society Meeting on Sunday, Nov. 12, right after potluck. What seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us, wrestling in our time and place with God's claims vs.

¹ https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_race.jsp

² https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_ethnicity.jsp

³ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045216>

⁴ <https://idot.illinois.gov/Assets/uploads/files/Transportation-System/Reports/Safety/Traffic-Stop-Studies/2016/2016%20TSS%20Agency%20Ratios%202012-2016.pdf> p. 3

Caesar's? How do we, together, live out what it means for our shared identity, not just as St. Paul's but as human beings, to be grounded in God?

And week after week, with humility and gratitude, we come to this Table. Here we receive God's provision of the grace and strength we all so desperately need, both to discern and to act.