

Proper 24 Year A
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem
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Exodus 33:12-23 Psalm 99 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 Matthew 22:15-22

We call today Stewardship Sunday, and it is a day on which we put our financial pledges in print so that, in part, the vestry can come up with a budget for 2024. Today, as every Sunday, is a “little Easter,” on which we celebrate and give thanks for the risen Lord. This year, we might also call today “little St. Nicholas Day,” as our fine stewardship team brought to our attention the generosity of St. Nicholas of Myra, our ancient Santa Claus. St. Nicholas showed compassion and care for those in need; one legend says that he literally threw gold coins in a window so that a man’s daughters would have a dowry – their key to life in that world. Without a dowry, the daughters would have been sold into slavery. A few gold coins changed lives. And that’s the deeper meaning of a Sunday on which we talk about stewardship and tally the funds Redeemer will have in 2024. Well beyond salaries and building maintenance, our giving helps this church change lives through our ministries beyond our doors.

The ancient Israelites wore jewelry of fine gold; money at one time was measured, more than minted: a coin was determined by weight. A gold bracelet could be a person’s money! Well, when Moses went to a mountaintop to talk with God, he was gone for a long time. The people grew restless. Where was their leader? Who was going to guide them? This God of Moses was nowhere to be seen. The people shed themselves of their gold, their currency, and melted it into an icon, an image, of a calf. This golden calf, the people told Aaron, is the new (little g) god. We’ll follow it. God and Moses are outraged; the people have hardened their hearts and gone far astray from the one who is guiding them to the Promised Land. So incensed is Moses that, when he sees the people dancing and worshipping the golden calf, he smashes the Covenant tablets, the two pieces of stone written on by God’s own finger.

Moses convinced God to remain with the Israelites and to fulfill the covenant that God made with them. This is where today’s readings pick up the story. Moses wants to know for sure that God will be with them in their journey. Moses wants to know what God means by “my presence will go with you.” We want to know that, too, right? Where is God in our journey? So far, things haven’t gone very well in the desert. “So, where are you gonna be, God?”

God reassures Moses in three ways:
God knows Moses by name;
God lets Moses know that Moses has found favor in God’s sight;
God will show Moses God’s glory, God’s *kavod*.

It is very hard for us to translate this word, *kavod*, glory, from Hebrew or to understand it in any language because we are trying to describe the indescribable. We are trying to see the goodness of God, God’s actions in the world; our bible translation comes close in saying that God passes by. God passes by, so that what we see is where God has been, the path of God near us. That

word, *kavod*, translates as “weightiness,” heaviness. In being close to God we experience wonder, awe, the weight of God’s presence that is not a burden. We have days like this in our lives: our baptism day, our wedding day, a day we receive a great, unexpected honor in the name of our Lord. That’s *kavod*, and it reflects where God passes by. Moses describes our longing for the real, the one God. When we experience, as Moses did, God’s glory, God’s path so close to us, we see the golden calf for what it is: a false icon of a little “g” god of our imagination. Our imaginations cannot contain God’s actual glory. But now we long for God’s presence. Into the wilderness we go, knowing that God is with us. We leave our false images behind. That’s still our experience at Redeemer – God is with us.

Money changed from the weight of precious metals to coins. The denarius is a coin used in ancient Rome. It is used in the marketplace and as a citizen of the Roman Empire. The coin has Caesar’s image, his icon – Caesar’s icon – on one side, and an icon, an image of a woman, Paz, on the other side. Paz means peace, so in the denarius we have an icon of Caesar and icon of the personification of peace. These coins are not used in the Temple because they have these icons, graven images, on them. From the Ten Commandments – thou shall make no graven images – these coins with engraved images violate the Laws of Moses. On this Roman coin is an image of a man who claims that he is divinely appointed by God to rule over the Roman Empire. Now we can see a little better what is happening when the Pharisees and some of their followers and a bunch of Herodians – people who follow King Herod – approach Jesus.

Their question is a trick, of course. The conversation begins with mock flattery, even though what the Pharisees’ followers say is true. Jesus IS sincere, speaks the truth of God, and shows no deference or partiality to anyone. Here the words are used as a ploy – let’s butter him up, let Jesus know that we’re on his side. Jesus, we know that you are all these things ... tell us:

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?

If Jesus says pay Caesar, Jesus is blasphemous to God, and if Jesus says only pay God, then Jesus commits treason against the Caesar and the Empire. It is a no-win question and a trap.

Everyone present knows the answer to Jesus’ question about whose head and whose title is on a denarius. The word translated as “head” is the word “icon,” “image” just like the word from Exodus (only in Greek). And the word “title” means “likeness.” Jesus asks: whose image and likeness is on that coin? Whose icon is this? Caesar’s, of course. This coin is a constant reminder that everything that you have as a Roman citizen you have because of Caesar. You live in his empire, his city, on his land; and because of him you have food and this money. Jesus is dismissive when he says that this coin is Caesar’s. Give it back to Caesar. Who cares? It’s his, anyway.

Jesus’ next words remind us of Satan tempting Jesus from the top of the Temple. Remember? Satan says you can have this **whole** world – meaning the Roman Empire – if you’ll worship me. Jesus does not fall for the trick then or now. In fact, Jesus takes us well beyond the Roman Empire, all the way back to the book of Genesis:

(Genesis 1:26-27) “And God said, Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. God created humankind in God’s image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Again we hear the word icon, image. **We** are made in the image and likeness of God. Give back to God, then, what is God's. There is a limit to what we give back to Caesar. There is no limit to what we owe, or could even think about giving back, to God. Our likeness and our image, our bodily being, is all from God. We belong to God. So much for that little Empire. We are part of God's universe, of all creation, of the stars and planets – of everything.

What does this have to do with Sunday, with Stewardship, with St. Nicholas? We are celebrating the risen Lord and the life that we have in him. We look in a mirror and see an icon of God. Right there. What do we give in thanksgiving for that? Not many of us are called to give 100% of our income away. God knows that the currency of "Caesar," of this world, is coins and bills, and that there are things of this world for which we use money. That's okay – give it to Caesar, and buildings, and the things for which we use money. At the same time, when we give money outside of ourselves, to churches and charities and ministries, we have **not** paid off some obligation. We have not bought our way into heaven. Our giving includes all of ourselves, which includes time on our calendars and offering our unique gifts to others.

What God wants is nothing less than to come and abide in your heart, to show you God's glory. We have been made in the image and likeness of God. God loves you! Bishop Frank Logue says that God keeps your picture in the divine wallet and on the heavenly refrigerator. God loves you that much! Jesus did not care about the tax because his real concern is that we live into the image and likeness of God who created us with pure love.

We begin to live into the image and likeness of God by conforming our lives to be more like Jesus' life. To live more fully into that image and likeness of God that is in you, give back your heart to God – for it is God's anyway. When we experience God's *kavod*, God's glory, more and more, we can with joy toss gold coins through the windows of those in need. We give generously back to God – our hearts, our stuff, our life and labor.

Remember how much Moses talked with God? Moses talked with God as if they were face-to-face, and the people saw God's glory, God's light, shining back at Moses. Talk to God in that same way, as if you are face to face, because, dear friends, we are. God gives us the same promises God gave to Moses:

God knows us by name;

You – we – have found favor in God's sight;

We see God's glory all around us and, when we invite God into our hearts, we see God's glory in ourselves and in one another.

So, my friends, we have freedom, freedom to shed our false icons, to fill ourselves with God's glory, and to give back to God what already belongs to God. Amen.