Matthew 22:15-22
21st Sunday after Pentecost
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Many years ago, when I was a college student in my roaring 20s, I would come home for a weekend or a holiday, offer some perfunctory hellos to my family, grab some dinner, and then zip out of the house as fast as possible to meet up with my friends. Inevitably, just before the crack of dawn, I would slink back in, and the morning inquisition was always the same: my mother would very casually ask, "What time did you get home last night?" Now you must understand: this is an unanswerable question. In the entire history of motherhood, all mothers at all times in all places know exactly when you got home last night. So if I told the truth and said 5:30am, I would be in deep trouble, but if I lied and said 1am, I would be in even deeper trouble for lying. There was simply no way to win. And as it turns out, that is exactly the kind of question Jesus gets in today's gospel. Not a real question. A trap.

This encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees and Herodians takes place on Tuesday of Holy Week, just 2 days after Palm Sunday. Jesus has already ridden into Jerusalem to shouts of hosanna. He has already overturned the tables in the temple. He has already told hard truths and dangerous parables in public. Tensions are high. People are furious. And his opponents are no longer merely irritated with him. They are trying to get rid of him. So now the Pharisees and the Herodians come together to trap Jesus with a question they believe he cannot answer. And just a quick sidebar here: these are not natural allies. The Pharisees and the Herodians did not generally spend their free time hanging out and sipping tea. The Pharisees were concerned with religious scrupulosity and law. The Herodians were aligned with the ruling political power and the Roman order. They despised each other, but they shared one common goal: Jesus had to go.

So they begin with some oily flattery; "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth". And then they spring the trap: "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" A simple yes or no question, except that it isn't simple at all. If Jesus says yes, then he risks alienating those who are already suffering under Roman occupation and taxation. If he says no, then he can be accused of sedition against the empire. Either way, they think they have him. It is a perfect set-up. But Jesus, being Jesus, refuses to play by the rules of their game. He asks them for a coin and says, "Whose image is on this coin?" "Caesar's," they answer. And Jesus says, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And this is where things get really dangerous. Not just for Jesus, but for you and me. Because for much of my life, I heard this passage preached as a fairly tidy lesson in dual citizenship. There is Caesar over here, and God over there, and your job is simply to keep your obligations sorted out accordingly. Pay your taxes, obey the law, go to church, say your prayers, and try not to mix things up too badly. But I think that reading is woefully incomplete. Yes, the coin bears the emperor's image. Fine. Give Caesar his little coin. But then comes the deeper question, the one Jesus does not need to say out loud because the whole of Scripture is already humming with it: whose image are you stamped with? Whose image is embedded in you?

Genesis tells us that humankind was created in the image and likeness of God. Which means that if the coin belongs to Caesar because it bears Caesar's image, then we belong to God because we bear God's. And suddenly we're not talking about taxes anymore. We are talking about identity and allegiance and truth. About whether we remember whose we are.

I've been thinking about all the ways the world tries to stamp us with some image other than God's. The entirely manufactured system of credit scores that claims to measure financial trustworthiness has become, in many cases, a tool that quietly reinforces inequity while masquerading as objectivity. Your score bears the image not just of your choices, but of the systems that decide which choices count, which risks are forgivable, and which lives are credible. And of course there is the pseudo-almighty algorithm, endlessly feeding us political outrage, curated desire, envy, resentment, and fear, all based on its synthetic guess about who we are and what will keep us scrolling. Advertisers do it. Governments do it. Political movements do it. Social institutions do it. Sometimes even churches do it. They tell us who we are. They try to stamp us in their own image. And over time, if we are not careful, we begin to believe them. We begin to imagine that we are what we produce and consume and earn, how we vote, what we fear, what the market says we are worth. What the empire finds useful. But Jesus says no, that is not who you belong to baby. You were knit together in your mother's womb in the image of God. You belong to God before you achieve or prove anything, before you get sorted and scored and categorized by all the petty Caesars of this world. And no amount of racism or sexism or transphobia or xenophobia-no ism, no phobia, no empire, no market, no machinery of contempt-gets to define what God has already named beloved.
Now all that is beautiful. But if we leave it there, it can remain lovely and abstract. So we have to ask the next question: what does it actually mean to belong to God? I think it means, first of all, that our worth is not up for auction. It means your life does not become more sacred when you become more successful. It means someone else's life does not become less sacred because they are poor, undocumented, incarcerated, trans, addicted, elderly, difficult, or forgotten. It means no human being can be reduced to a problem, a category, a threat, or a number, because every human being bears the image of God.

And if this is true, then belonging to God must shape how we live. It means we tell the truth, even when lying would be easier. It means we spend our money in ways that reflect mercy and justice rather than mere appetite. It means we stop speaking about other people as if they were disposable. It means we refuse the easy liturgies of contempt. It means we examine our allegiances and ask, over and over and over again: is this claim on my heart coming from God, or from Caesar?
Because that is the great spiritual struggle, isn't it? Not whether we will say we belong to God in here, in church, for one hour on a Sunday. The struggle is whether we will remember it out there. In the voting booth. In the marketplace and in the boardroom. On social media and in family arguments. In the secret silences of our own hearts when the shame starts whispering lies.
Beloveds, there is no shortage of seemingly unanswerable questions. We do not know whether our fragile democracy will hold. We do not know whether we have waited too long to undo the damage we have done to our planet. We do not know if what we are handing on to our children is even worth saving.

These are real fears. Faith does not require us to pretend that everything is going to be fine, or to sit back and wait for God to do what God is plainly calling us to do. Faith means that we remember who we belong to anyway. And when we remember that-really remember it-we know what to do. We tell the truth. We resist cruelty. We demand justice. We refuse to make a spectacle of the suffering or death of those who bear the image of God. Instead, we practice allegiance to God through prayer, generosity, courage, and love. We do the next right thing in front of us. Not because success is guaranteed, but because our lives are not our own. We belong to God.

My grandfather, the Rev John Wesley Hatch Sr, used to preach, "You better act like you KNOW you are a child of God! Walk like you KNOW you are made in God's image!" And when we remember who we are, we remember whose we are. Our closing hymn proclaims, "ALL my hope on God is founded, He doth still my trust renew, me through change and chance he guideth, only good and only true. God unknown, He alone calls my heart to be His own." AMEN.