

THE FACE ON THE COIN

Matthew 22:15-22

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, October 19, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

These words, phrased this way, are relatively famous among those from the lips of Jesus.

- They have often been the basis for discussing, or even deciding, “the extent to which the church is or is not involved with the political process and what responsibilities Christians have to the state.”¹
- My introduction to these words occurred in the Presbyterian Church in the late 1960s, as the church discussed matters of war and peace, military service and conscientious objection, during the Viet Nam years.
- Yet even as these words raise issues of church and state, “they are open to a variety of interpretations and [can lead] to sometimes radically different” conclusions.² As a young person, I recall this text being used by people expressing sympathy for those who refused to serve in Viet Nam, and by people supportive of our involvement there and expecting those called to serve.

As the 1960s passed, the war ended, and I went to college and seminary, I learned that these words are more about theological entrapment than about what role church and state play in the life of the Christian. Those who asked Jesus the question to which these words proved answer sought to entrap him. In consecutive order, they asked him about paying taxes, the status of marriage in the resurrection,³ and which commandment was the greatest.⁴ Those seeking to entrap him represented two different parties, united only by their growing opposition to Jesus:

- One party was religious, the Pharisees, for whom demands of Rome offended their loyalty to and observance of the laws of God
- The other party was more secular, the Herodians whose loyalty to Herod (Rome) led them to be suspicious of Jews like Jesus, who refused to swear allegiance to the Roman gods.

Thus, if Jesus advised paying taxes to Caesar, he risked being accused of blasphemy by the Pharisees; if he advised against paying taxes, the Herodians could charge him with treason.

He avoids this trap by urging people to think for themselves:

“Whose face is on the coin?” he asks.

“Caesar’s,” the answer comes.

“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 531-533.

² Brueggemann 532.

³ Matthew 15:23-33.

⁴ Matthew 15:34-40.

Even in a society where matters religious are not as voluntary as ours, Jesus' words are an implicit challenge to each individual to decide

- What belongs to God and what belongs to the state
- What belongs to God and what belongs to the culture in which we live
- What belongs to God and what belongs to the family
- What belongs to God and what belongs to the political philosophy we hold
- What belongs to God and what belongs to the vocation through which we often "live and move and have our being."

"Whose face is on the coin?" Jesus asks each of us. "What belongs to God and what belongs to the culture in which you live, the life you follow, the values you hold dear that may or may not be consistent with God?"

Whose face is on our coin?

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We are in an interesting time in our country. Presidential election. Economic crisis. Continued threat of terrorism even as the efforts we wage against it have all but receded from our consciousness in light of our worries about the economy. As a nation, we are asking ourselves: "What is important to us? What do we value as Americans? Whose face is on our coin?"

Columnist Thomas Friedman wrote this week.

...at heart [our financial bubble] is really very simple. We got away from the basics – from the fundamentals of prudent lending and borrowing, where the lender and borrower maintain some kind of personal responsibility for, and personal interest in, whether the person receiving the money can actually pay it back.⁵

"We got away from the basics," he says. "We lost sight of whose face was on the coin."

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These are also interesting times for Westminster.

We have known real blessing the past few years.

- A terrific interim minister and period of healing
- Two highly successful capital campaigns, back to back
- A complete renovation of our facilities– to the tune of a little over \$6 million – of which we owe the bank a little more than \$600,000 and our foundation \$200,000
- And this year we have really started to grow in membership, to grow with people in their twenties and thirties, reaping the benefit of the years of planning and execution involved in the renovation.

But we've also known sadness.

- Some terrific older members have passed away and more are preparing to cross the Jordan as we speak
- Some terrific long time leaders are moving away
- And our long time, loved, respected Associate Pastor, Karen Blomberg, passed away far too young and far too quickly.

These losses have only made us more deeply appreciative of the faces that are on our coin as a church:

- Our worship together, Sunday after Sunday
- Our sense of fellowship, of caring for one other, of sharing our joys and concerns
- Our love of education, from the youngest children and their parents, to youth and their parents, to adults in classes and small groups, Biblical, theological, social, political
- And our commitment to care for people in Alexandria, in the greater Washington area, in key spots across our nation, and around the world, particularly in Kenya.

⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, "Why How Matters," *The New York Times* 10/15/08.

Like Mt. Rushmore, the coin at Westminster has four faces:

- Worship
- Education
- Fellowship
- Mission

As many of you know, we have been in an envisioning process this year, a process to determine what we can be and do over the next few years now that our renovation is complete. As the Envisioning Task Force has gathered information and ideas, they have decided to focus on one major area: the future of mission at Westminster. They are now working on answers for the following questions:

- How do we define mission at Westminster?
- How do we measure our dedication to mission?
- How does our current dedication to mission compare with our dedication to worship, education, and fellowship?
- Do we need to better integrate mission into the life of the church to encourage greater awareness and participation? If so, how?
- Should we focus new efforts on increased national/international needs, or on an identifiable role in the local community?
- How can we use our assets (facilities, music, time, and individual talents) to engage the community, other churches, civic groups, etc?

Recommendations around these questions will come to the officers at the annual Officer Intreat in February. Assuming there is strong officer and congregational support, we will then give our energy to shaping, forming, implementing this next phase of our life.

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In many ways, as Friedman suggests, the economic crisis is forcing us as citizens to ask what is basic in our lives, to ask: "Whose face is on our coin?" None of us in this room can say what the next year will bring for our economy. The crisis is too new and fresh to make any significant prognostication. But what we can say is this: In times like these, what our faith means to us right now is about as important as it has ever been.

Those of us who mourn Karen's loss appreciate the sense of community we have at Westminster more than ever.

Three days after her memorial service, I had an early morning breakfast with the two elders on the Personnel Committee (Eileen Denne and Karen Olson) and the two elders leading the Envisioning Task Force (Melynda Wilcox and Steve Denne).

We met at Table Talk, that venerable institution where I am told many of the most significant conversations in Alexandria occur.

I had called this meeting because I was going away for a three-week vacation, and I wanted to talk with them about how we could start picking up the pieces following Karen's death, because I knew I would be thinking about this while I was away.

We didn't make any decisions; rather, we just talked, told stories, broke bread, shared omelettes. When I left the breakfast to walk the few blocks to my home, it was a bright summer morning, and as I had done several times in the week following Karen's death, I began to weep. I called Maggie, who was still getting ready to go to her church. I said: "There there is at least one terrific church left on the face of the earth, and I have had the good fortune to be called to it."

Karen's death has led me to value even more the face on my coin called Westminster.

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Unlike in previous years, I am preaching only one stewardship sermon this season. The next two Sundays I am going to preach about leadership as we all prepare for an election. Two days before that election, on Sunday, November 2nd, the Session of our church asks you to make the best financial pledge you can make to the ministry of Westminster for 2009. We do so acknowledging the uncertainty and nervousness we all feel.

As I do every year, I ask you to do consider one thing, depending on where you are in your financial giving:

- If you are not pledging, I ask you to begin that spiritual discipline, and to consider pledging at least 2% of your gross income in 2009 to Westminster Church, whether your income is more, or less, or the same as it will be in 2008.
- If you are already pledging, as most of you are, I ask you to get on a disciplined but reachable path toward tithing. By tithing I mean 10% of your gross income to the church. This is the most consistent standard in Judaism and Christianity, in the Old Testament and New. It is a standard Maggie and I have exceeded, for I would not ask you to follow a standard I have not yet myself attained. She and I will exceed a tithe to our respective churches in 2009, even as we worry about retirement planning, pay nearly full fare on two kids in private colleges in the Midwest, and, like nearly everyone here, live in expensive housing.

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This year, during stewardship, I also do something I don't normally do. I ask you to make sure that you are involved in the ministries and mission of this congregation at the right level for your faith and, if you live in a family, for your family.

I have now completed four years in our congregation. I've always been involved in worship and education; this past year, I have become more heavily involved in our system of pastoral care and, with Karen's death, in our mission.

I am now able to say, based on my own knowledge, that if you are willing to become more involved with Westminster but don't know how or where, just call me, or email me, or see me after church (see I have a yellow card in my pocket), and I will make sure you get connected with some place you can serve that fits your faith at this time in your life.

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When all is said and done, for a high percentage of us in this room, the face on our coin belongs to God. The place we are nurtured in our service to God is this place – Westminster. For many of us, the face of Westminster is superimposed on the face of God. This just may be a time in our nation's history and a time in our life together where we need to put first what is really important to us, the face of our church, and the face of God, of our God in whose image our church is shaped and formed.

Amen.