

Lesson: Thessalonians 1:1-10
The Gospel: Matthew 22:15-22

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
October 18, 2020

“The Image of God”
Sermon Preached by Lowell D. Nelson
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Grace and peace and truth to you through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Thank you for being part of our online community, ALC, here in the sanctuary for services in the weekend, with you wherever you may be. The simple encouragement, if I netted it all out, is that life is a miracle, a miracle of God and to treat the image of God with the full power of his love and grace and to treat one another made in the image of God allows a sense of self-respect, of self-image that is embedded in this precious truth that we have been created out of love so that we have a sense of confidence and we're able to treat others with respect. “In God we trust” is the model of the US government and for we the people. “In God we trust” - it began in the Civil War time. That phrase had been modified a little bit, but that phrase, “in God we trust,” was important during such a difficult, difficult time in our nation's history, and it resurrected again using that word back in the 1950s post-World War II confusion about how to address communism, and the phrase “under God” was added to the pledge of allegiance, and all forms of money, for sure, had “in God we trust.” Money is a marvelous tool. Money allows us to invest and to spend and to share and to be generous, but it is simply a tool, and so there are sometimes when I see that phrase on a dollar bill or a five dollar bill or ten dollar bill, not too often a hundred dollar bill, but as I see it, “in God we trust,” it is common for us to look at this dollar, money, currency, and bluntly that's where our confidence is. Luther chided people who your God is, is where you put your confidence in, and let's be honest, most of us put our confidence in money.

And so, this question in the Gospel text is such an interesting question to me about the image of God. The test was two different groups, the Pharisees and the Herodians. We don't know much about the Herodians, but they were certainly supportive of king Herod, but two different political groups, the Pharisees and Herodians, were trying to trap Jesus. Both of them viewed him as a nuisance at best, and so they're trying to ask a question that no matter how you answer it, you get the wrong answer. Should we pay taxes to Caesar? If you say yes, that shows that you are in favor of the dominating political force at the time, subjugating people to a life of slavery, and so absolutely the wrong answer for religious leaders. But if you say no, then you're doing, usurping the power there and basically saying it's time to revolt, and so no matter how Jesus would answer it, he'd be caught. Of course, Christ, through the gift of his Lordship, knows this and answers in a way and asks him to bring out a coin. Perhaps you've seen pictures of coins from that time period, made in a

way that had the image of the emperor. Bluntly, God was understood through the emperor, worshiped as an expression of God, and as they pulled it out and said whose inscription is on this, whose image is on this, it actually has a subtle little message that it would have been easier during that time to not pull that out and bring out the shekel. The shekel was what was used, the Jewish currency. That was what was used to pay the temple tax, and so by pulling out, we'll call it the Roman coin, shows that the people who are asking him were part of this greater system. They were trying to trick him even though they're part of it. The way I understand the Gospel, opening up, is there are common things in which we invest as people of God. Schools and roads and police, all of these are part of our unified identity as people of the community, people of this nation, people of the world. There is no separation. It does not make sense to say we're so heavenly minded, we're of no earthly use, and so we don't want to pay anything like that. We're part of this community, and we vote, and we address issues together, but the key to me, this key of having an image of God placed upon our heart, is understanding the living God. There are so many idols. They're so subtle. There's so many, but I've mentioned money, but it can be your position. It can be your house. It can be even the United States can be treated as an idol. We serve the living God.

The Psalm 96 says it this way, "For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised, more feared than all Gods. As for the gods of the nations, they are but idols, but you O Lord have made the heavens." It is an amazing miracle of life, and don't let anybody squash your ability to say that life is a miracle, that we have a living God. It says this in the first Thessalonians text, how you have turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and what a miracle that is. So, that the life comes to us not only in the word through the scriptures but in the word of Jesus Christ power and the power of the Holy Spirit, full of conviction. So, money, then, is treated merely as a means of exchange but always with tremendous respect for the other, knowing God's love, then respect for one another, and it starts with self-respect for oneself. Isn't it so amazing that as they were trying to trick Jesus in the Matthew text it says this? "We know that you are sincere. You teach the way of God in accordance with truth and show deference to no one for you do not regard people with partiality."

What a setup, but it's the Gospel truth. Jesus treats each one of us with an amazing love, each and every one of us, so I want to shift just this emphasis of "in God we trust" is not purely for money. It is not. It is in our respect for the living God and the self-respect we have for ourselves, made in God's image. This is an amazing concept. It's throughout the scriptures that we're made in God's image, not as a sign of pride but as a sign of great worth ascribed from God to us, and when we understand that for one another, then we understand that in a way that allows respect and mutuality and hope for the deliverance of this world and all the many problems that we are part of God's kingdom. C.S. Lewis said it this way. He said until you have given up yourself to Him, you will not have a real self, self-image,

self-identity, all the words we use for the self. I'm encouraging you to take this and understand it as you were made in the image of God. That is a sign of moving up into being a Godhead. Don't let that go. There's plenty of traps for that when I'm talking about that you were made by God, for God's purposes, and the resources that you have, the money that you have, is part of this continuum of investing for God's purposes. You are an agent of change. You are part of this kingdom of God. Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's.

A final comment here. Ravi Zacharias, a Christian apologist. That's the formal use of the word. He's not apologizing for being a Christian. He's defending the faith. That's what he did, and he just recently passed. He had teased that he had wished that Jesus had answered this differently. Is it okay to pay taxes or not, and he was hoping Jesus would have said no you don't need to pay them. He kind of teased about that, but what he said something provocative to me, this question give to the emperor the things are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's, he was expecting one more question. What belongs to God? And the phrase he used is whose image is on you? Whose image is upon us? Reclaim your baptismal identity, the image, the cross of Christ sealed forever by the Holy Spirit right on your forehead. This image seen by God, understood by yourself as a blessed strength in which you are able to have a self-identity, uniquely and beautifully connected to God and seeing the other in your life, whether it's your family or whether it's the community or whether it's people you do not know, scarcely know, we are the people who understand and treat them with respect, because they too were created by God. Until you have given up yourself to Him, you will not have a real self. C.S. Lewis says that. I think it's such an important thing.

“In God we trust” is not just a platitude. It's how we live. All our time and our possessions, our testimony, and our resources are agents of God's mission, so yes there is the common in which we invest in, but there is the sacred in which we promote this message of Jesus Christ. So, brothers and sisters, be full of hope. The image of God is the image of a God who is alive, full of love and resources for this life through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. The image of God is placed upon us in loving creation, and the image of God is in our brothers and sisters where we are full of the confidence of movement and ministry, so that in this time, in this place we are bold in our actions, the image of God. Amen.