

Pentecost 19, Proper 24, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

When I was in seminary
one of the things that was impressed on me in preaching class was,
“Don’t bleed all over the congregation!”
I’m going to try not to bleed all over you this morning.

As many of you know, last Saturday, my sweet nephew Laughlin
died. As you can imagine, our family is grieving, as are many people across the world who
prayed for him. But much as we miss him, I am comforted by the knowledge that he is now safe
with God, and so thankful for the gift he was to us. The sunflowers here are in celebration of his
life.

And as I read the gospel today
I heard one interpretation of it
that caught my attention.

You see,
I’d always read it this way.
Some of the religious leaders
were getting worried
about the attention Jesus was drawing.
He’s been collecting crowds from all over,
and they were getting rowdy.
The religious leaders
were beginning to lose control.
And so they decided to trap him
with a question about taxes.
After all, no one likes taxes,
no one, except the people
who get to spend the money collected.
In this case,
the Romans.
The religious leaders knew
that if Jesus were to support the Romans and their taxes
he would likely lose
most of his followers.
But if he said anything against the Romans,
they
would quietly

eliminate him.

It was a trap.

Either way, Jesus would lose.

At least, that was their plan.

“So, should we pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” they asked innocently.

“Hmmm...” said Jesus. “Show me a coin,”

And so someone fumbled in his pocket

and pulled out a small silver coin, a denarius.

“Tell me,” said Jesus, “whose face is on the coin?”

“The emperor’s, of course.”

“So give the emperor

what belongs to him, and give God

what belongs to God.”

And the religious leaders who opposed him

went away frustrated

because he didn’t fall into their trap.

Now the way I’ve most often heard this story preached,

especially in stewardship time,

is to say basically,

just like you pay the government your taxes

so you should pay God, God’s taxes.

In other words, pay your tithe to God - and that would be your pledge.

But what if the story didn’t end there.

What do you imagine the next thing

part of the conversation would be

between Jesus and his followers.

It would probably be Peter that spoke first.

“But Lord, we can see the picture of the emperor on his money. It’s easy to tell what belongs to him.

But we don’t have money with God on it.

That would be against that commandment about making a graven image.

So how do we know what to give to God?”

“Peter, think.

Don’t you remember

where we see

God's image?

Remember those words in Scripture,

'Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image,

in the image of God he created them;

male and female he created them.'

Don't you remember?

You

are God's image. You

and you

and you

and you

and you."

We are the image

of God.

We belong to him.

All week,

I've been thinking about my nephew, remembering events from his life.

And one of those was his baptism.

It was the middle of my first year here at St James, and Lockey was my first godson.

And there, in a thousand year old church in the English countryside

Laughlin

was baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

and marked as Christ's own

forever.

He belongs

to God.

And not just Laughlin.

Yesterday, one of our young adults,

Jaime DeFilippis was confirmed at our Cathedral,

and after laying hands on her and praying for her, Bishop Chilton

anointed her with the oil of chrism, the oil that we use in anointing at baptism,

to remind her

that she is still baptized

into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,

she is still marked

as Christ's own
forever.

And every one of us here, every one of us
who has been baptized
bears the image of God,
every one of us
is marked as Christ's own
forever.

And going back to our gospel reading for today,
we can imagine Peter saying,
"But Lord, I still don't get it! We can see the emperor's face
on the coin,
and so it makes sense
to give it to the tax collectors.
But
we're people.
We're not coins. We don't fit in a purse.
How are we supposed to give ourselves to God?"

And you can just imagine Jesus sighing.
"Peter, really? Haven't you got it yet?"

And it's not surprising
that it's just a little later in this chapter,
that Jesus answers another question,
another religious leader trying to trap him,
"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

And perhaps he's not so much answering the religious leader
as Peter
and the other disciples
who are still
confused.

"How do we give
ourselves to God?"

"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Our stewardship
is not just some sort of tax
that we give to God.
No, it is an offering of our very selves,
the money we pledge
a visible reminder
that we belong to God,
and that we are secure
as Christ's own forever.

Now
as we did a couple of weeks ago
I'm going to ask you to find someone to talk to, preferably not related to you,
and answer these questions:

- What does it mean to you to bear God's image?
- How do you give God what is God's?