

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 22:15-22

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

October 18, 2020

Whose Image Do You See?

Almost three years ago, when our first child was born, a fascinating phenomenon occurred that continued through at least the first year and a half of his life. Family, friends, and strangers, upon meeting him and seeing us, even within the first few hours of his life, would declare with strong conviction that he looked JUST like Marion or that he looked JUST like me. Marion will testify to it too, this happened to us ALL the time from the wrinkly newborn stage to the early toddler days. One time, we went to a friend's birthday celebration when Ezra was almost one year old and her parents came up and greeted us and saw him and told us, "Oh my goodness, he looks EXACTLY like YOU, Marion!" and I'm not even kidding, five minutes later, the in-laws came up to us and said, "Oh my goodness, he looks EXACTLY like YOU, Irene!"

Both Marion and I were regularly amused by this because we could not see either one of us in him as clearly as others could. I didn't think he really looked just like Marion and I didn't think he really looked just like me.

This whole phenomenon of who our child looked like elicited a memory from my early 20s. You see, it was in my 20s that some friends and I were talking about these future babies we might have one day, and one of them said to me, "Oh my gosh, Irene, you are going to have the cutest Asian babies!" And I know this is going to sound ridiculous, but it was in that declaration, yes, in my 20s, that I actually realized that if I ever had biological children that they would look like me or at least partly like me...and that that meant Asian. And do you know what I said to her? "Oh my gosh! I'm going to have Asian babies! That's going to be so cute!" 😊

I know that statement sounds ridiculous to you now, (you and me both), but I really had never absorbed that the image I bear in a literal sense would be stamped upon someone else. It came with some major unpacking and self-reflection because I had internalized a lot of self-loathing growing up. I was immersed in a predominantly white community also as a religious minority, never really seeing any other Asian Americans or people of color except my own family... and a handful of others...and through critical adolescent years I was constantly wishing I had blonde hair and blue eyes so I could "fit in." It took me a long time to honor the image of God in myself.

By the time I was in my 20s I had started accepting and loving the image of God that had been imprinted upon me, and so even though it seems like a silly story, it was exciting to realize that I might have babies that looked like me...and now as many of you know, I have two! And they really do look Asian! 😊

Now you're probably wondering how in the world I'm going to connect this story to the gospel lesson today, so bear with me. You see, even as I have finally come to embody and love the image God has reflected in and through me and now that I see in my own children and family, we are living in times where we are all navigating as a nation division and fear and angst...and quite frankly, people of color are feeling more and more unsafe and threatened, particularly our black and brown siblings. And as we are navigating a pandemic that the President of this country continues to call the Chinese virus, folks are being more emboldened to also target with hateful words or actions anyone who looks Asian, yes, even here in the Bay Area.

Because of this and too many other injustices to name right now, many of us have lost our ability to extend kindness, generosity, and grace to those whose views differ from ours and it seems to get harder every day. And so as we're navigating all of this, I'm struggling to receive and live into today's gospel lesson where Jesus tells us to give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's. How do I release those things that I need to release? How do I give to God what I need to give to God? What does that mean for you and for me in these days?

On the surface this story could just be an honest story about taxation. Do we pay our taxes or not, Jesus? Even that question feels loaded in present day, doesn't it?

But it's more than that. You see, the Pharisees and the Herodians ask Jesus this question to entrap him. They're asking out of malice and a mutual desire to bring him down. Yes, they coat it with sugary words and flattering sounds, "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?"

You see, the tax question they ask Jesus, is about a particular tax. Just like we have property taxes, sales tax, and income taxes, Jews in first century Palestine had many taxes as well-land taxes, temple taxes, and customs taxes

just to name a few. The one they are asking Jesus about, it's what was known as the Imperial tax that was paid as a tribute to Rome to support the Roman occupation of Israel. So basically, the Jewish people of Jesus' time were required to pay their oppressors to support their own oppression. Messed up, right?

In this case, the Herodians are a group put to power by Rome and supported their "governance" of Israel. A majority of the people living there and those in the crowd listening were opposed to the tax because it was a reminder of their oppression and humiliation. And, the Pharisees, representing the religiously devout, were forced to pay this tax as well, so by asking Jesus this question, it was set up to be a lose-lose situation for him. By setting him up this way, they thought that Jesus' answer would either disappoint the crowd by advocating for the tax, or put himself in jeopardy with the Roman officials by arguing against it.

And Jesus responds brilliantly by stating the obvious and asking the question—whose image is on it? Whose image do you see? Whose title? And they say, "Caesar. The emperor."

"Give therefore to Caesar, the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." By laying out the two alternatives side by side, Jesus trusts those who are faithful to God to know the difference.

Debie Thomas in her essay *Journey with Jesus* writes, "It's important to stop here, and note what Jesus does *not* say. He doesn't say that there are two distinct realms, the religious and the secular, and that they require our equal fidelity. What he says is far more subtle and complicated: the coin is already the emperor's — there's his face stamped right on it — so give it to him. But *then* consider the much harder question: What belongs to God? What kind of tribute do we owe to God?"

And so if we answer that question in the same way Jesus did, today I'm asking you as you think about what it is you are to give and to release to God ... whose image is upon you? What do you see there? Who do **you** look like? And are you proud of what you see or are you currently caught up in a period of self-loathing?

Friends, I hope that you can state without a doubt that you are the beloved image of God. You bear the image of God. And if we are God's currency in this world, how we are used, what we give, and how we reflect that image in us is significant, especially in these divided, angry, and easy to hate the "other"

days. The kind of tribute we owe to God is remembering how we are marked – by love. By beauty. And the all out intention and work we must do in order to not allow ourselves to be used against one another or to feed into our own or our neighbor's oppression.

You see friends, just like my own internalized racism made it hard to see and honor the image of God in myself, I think for all of us, because of whatever experience we have been through, it can take time to honor the image of God in ourselves and in someone else ... there may be a lot of unlearning and relearning you have to do ... because if we cannot see the image of God in ourselves or in our neighbor or enemy, then how can we set apart those things that are for God and those things that are of and only for this world?

Thomas continues to write, "The thing is, when I read the Gospels, I don't see a Jesus who cares more about the end than the means. If anything, he *privileges* the means: the one who calls himself the Way understands that the *way* we go about achieving our goals — the language we use or abuse, the stories we privilege or silence, the people we protect or oppress, the truths we proclaim or deny — these make all the difference in the world."

Friends, you and I know there is a lot happening to try to entrap us. Words and tweets and news from people in positions of power that are sugar coated and sound sweet but are full of malice and the intent to deceive. And our own hearts are becoming hardened as we navigate it all.

And so friends, today, I invite us to remember Jesus' words here, to look at that coin and give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to give unto God that which belongs to God...which is everything. And it begins by remembering and seeing the image that is stamped upon you and me and honoring that holy spark. And as we think about stewardship this month, I invite you to think about how you will share your coin, your image, your entire self. Because even as we are human and fallible, when I still hear the voices of hate in the name of the God that I serve dominating the Christian conversation, I want to invest my whole self into places that faithfully try to speak love over and over and over again. And I still believe Stone Church tries to do that. That's why I'm still here. Why are you here?

I want to close with a poem by Bob James, who is, as you might have heard, 100 years old today and been a member of Stone pretty much since it's inception. And I got to talk to Bob and Hazel on Thursday and he shared with me that when he reflects each night upon his day and his life, he prays in gratitude to God and said to me, "because we don't get by any of this alone."

And so, I thought it might be special to hear the poem from Bob himself:
(show video)

“JUST MAYBE” by member Bob James (who is 100 years old today)

“Maybe you are at the age when you don’t give a hoot what other people think.

Maybe you are at the age when you should be seeing a shrink.

I don’t think it matters whether you’re a man or a lady.

I believe He can help you change the way you think ... just maybe.

Open your heart and listen to the other guy and let a little love come in.

It just may change the way you think.

It’s certainly time you give it a try ... just maybe.”

Friends, today, let us receive the words and perspective from a soul who has lived 100 years today... “open your heart and listen...let a little love come in.” And may the image we see in ourselves this week reflect the goodness and mercy of our Almighty God. Because whether or not you are able to see it, you look *just* like the holy and loving God that I know. May we believe it and receive it. Amen.