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Isaiah 49:13-16
Matthew 22:15-22

“Engraved in Gold, or Inscribed in Flesh?”

Some years ago, we were living in Columbus, Ohio. One particular evening I was returning home from an out-of-town assignment. Pat was gone for the week ... and I was thinking about dinner. And I had Church's fried chicken on my mind. There was a Church's fried chicken store two blocks from our home. On some days, when the breeze was blowing just right, the fragrance of fried chicken wafted directly over to our house. I had to strictly ration myself. Now it was well into the evening ... probably after 9 o'clock. And I had fried chicken on my mind ... probably all the way as I drove from Zanesville to Columbus. The chicken place was bustling. I went in, took a number, ordered the usual ... a breast and a thigh and cole slaw (I needed something healthy)

I walked out to my car ... and three men approached me. “Give me that box,” one demanded. I handed it over. He took it, and ran.

The second said ... “Your money. “Give me your money.” I pulled out my money clip with a variety of bills. I turned it over. “Your wallet,” he added. It flashed through my mind having to go through all the time and energy to replace driver's license, and credit cards, but no question. I turned over my wallet. And he ran.

But the third fellow who wore a long coat, and he had a hand in his pocket ... like this ... and he said, “Give me the keys to your car.” I don't know where this came from, but I said, “Expletive deleted NO. “You have my fried chicken, my money and my wallet. That's it. I'm keeping my car.”

By this time several people had gathered around. And the man ran. And I drove home. Shaking.

Having told that story, I recognize that it's a little off the subject so we need to get down to business with this story of Jesus with the Pharisees-in-training who had partnered with the Herodians.

The Pharisees, remember, were committed to all things Jewish. Especially the Torah – the law of Moses. And the Midrash, the vast portfolio of interpretations and applications that developed around the Torah. And the Pharisees were offended by Roman intrusion throughout the country. They refused to use the Roman coins, for those coins were sacrilege. They bore the image of Caesar, the Roman Emperor.

The Herodians, however, were Jews who collaborated with the Romans. And they envisioned the re-establishment of a Herodian dynasty like under Herod Antipas (who had beheaded John the Baptist) The Herodians relied on Roman favor to hold their positions so they didn't want to do anything to sour their relationship with Rome. Especially with the Roman Emperor.

So now Jesus is fending-off the Pharisees and Herodians.

“Good teacher, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

Yes, that was a trick question ... designed to trap Jesus. To discredit Jesus. It's a yes or no question that is calculated to make Jesus look dumb, or is guaranteed to get Jesus into trouble. At least that's what the questioners expect.

If Jesus says “yes, pay taxes to Caesar,” then much of the crowd will be angered with Jesus, for the Pharisees as well as the common people who followed Jesus and heard him with joy and hope, their combined voices agreed that paying any taxes to Rome ... accepting any authority of the Romans ... giving any recognition to Caesar was an act of treason to the Lord God. Betrayal to their commitment to the Lord God. Even handling the coins with Caesar's image stamped on it was offensive to many.

But if Jesus says “No ... No, it is not lawful to pay taxes to Caesar”, then the Herodians, who depended on playing nice with the Romans in order to maintain their lofty positions, and who received a cut of the taxes, they would be desperately offended.

But Jesus recognizes what they are up to. They're going to make him look foolish, one way or the other. They're going to string-him-up figuratively this day. Or one day off in the future, it may come to them stringing him up literally.

Jesus asks, "Show me the coin used for the tax."

They gave Jesus a denarius.

"Whose head is on this? and whose title?"

They answer The image is Caesar. The Emperor.

Matter-of-factly, Jesus instructs,

"Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor's.
Give to God the things that are God's"

And they are amazed with the answer. Startled speechless. And they go away shaking their heads. They will take Jesus down another day. They will find another way.

At a deeper level, however, this vignette is much more than Jesus outwitting the opposition. When Jesus asks for a coin, he not only asks, whose head is on this coin? That is, whose image is this and whose title? It's a Roman coin ... and it bears the image of the Emperor. Caesar!

Humans, however The men and women and children who surrounded Jesus, all bear the image of God. They do not belong to the Emperor ... **THEY BELONG TO GOD**. They are created in God's image.

GOD AND THE EMPEROR ARE NOT EQUALS.

Nor are they symbolic names for separate realms. If so, one could figure that the emperor has his domain in which he can demand ultimate allegiance and the Lord God is assigned to another realm.

Quite the contrary ... Men and women bear God's image, and where ever we live and operate – whether in the social, or economic, or political or religious realm -- **WE BELONG TO GOD**.

Our primary loyalty does not switch when we move from church and enter the voting booth. **WE BELONG TO GOD**.

Our primary loyalty does not adapt when we move from worship to our employment or to retirement. Rather, WE BELONG TO GOD.

Our primary loyalty does not recalibrate when we move from prayer to play. WE BELONG TO GOD.

“Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor’s.
Give to God the things that are God’s”

No, that instruction doesn’t solve the question of church contrasted with the state.

It doesn’t answer many lingering questions about a Christian’s obligations to the government...

or to taxation ...

or to service in the military ... or the like,
but it does set allegiances into a certain order.
Into an order of priorities.

Priorities from trivial to essential.

From self-pleasing to God pleasing.

From splitting our loyalties ...

to loving God with our whole heart, soul,
strength and mind and loving our neighbor as
we love ourselves ...

Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor’s.
Give to God the things that are God’s”

Jesus, in this passage does not offer a single pattern describing how governments and how nations and churches best organize ourselves. Rather, Jesus gives space for a wide variety of arrangements, but at the same time, remember that all God’s children/all God’s people bear the divine image AND THEREFORE BELONG TO GOD.

We bear the divine image. How is that?

The denarius bears the image of Caesar; so it belongs to Caesar. Let Caesar have those lifeless coins, Jesus says.

But that which bears God's image – women and men of every tribe and tongue...of every race and creed ... BELONG TO GOD.

The value of the coin shrinks;
the value of every human life is enriched.

And that brings me around to that evening in Columbus, Ohio. First my fried chicken ... gone. My money gone. My credit cards gone ... My car Yes, I stood fast for my car. That was preserved.

But in the Old Testament passage Merle read, Isaiah had lost everything. His friends and neighbors and family. God's people – especially the leaders -- were taken into exile to Babylon --- a foreign land. Their awesome Temple was destroyed. Their precious memories scattered along that 900 mile trek into captivity.

Isaiah moaned, as Merle read ... “The Lord has forsaken me. My Lord has forgotten me.”

And the Lord speaks, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Though you may forget, yet I will not forget you.”

”See, God says, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.”

Engraved in Gold? Or inscribed on the palms of God's hands?

Engraved in Gold. That's good for as long as the emperor rules.

Inscribed on the palms of God's hands. That's good for as long as you carry the image of God – which is your birthright and can never be scrubbed-off.

Engraved in Gold. Ah, the value goes up and down.

Inscribed on the palms of God's hands. God's love never lets you go. God's love endures forever.

Engraved in Gold. So it is buried/or hidden-away for safekeeping. And more and more, I realize I forgot where I put it.

Inscribed on the palms of God's hands. I rely on ... I trust God's memory. For a woman is attentive to her nursing child, and shows utmost compassion for the child of her womb. Though we may forget, yet God will not forget us.

So sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

"Give to the emperor the things that are of the emperor, like those measly coins. Give to God the things that are Gods.

That isn't difficult to figure out, for other than those paltry coins,
IT ALL BELONGS TO GOD.

And we are God's. God made us in God's own image.

AND WE ARE INSCRIBED ON THE PALMS OF GOD'S HANDS.

AND THAT IS SO MUCH BETTER – MUCH BETTER
NOURISHMENT – THAN FRIED CHICKEN.