

October 18, 2020 Sermon
Matthew 22:15-22

A song came out in 1971 by the Temptations, called "Smiling Faces." The opening words are "Smiling faces, sometimes, they don't tell the truth. Smiling faces, tell lies and I got proof."

What do you see when you look at the face of another person? It can be someone you know or someone you don't know, but faces are important. Sometimes, they can tell us the truth about a person, and sometimes they offer a false sense of security.

My cousin and her husband own several mattress shops in Ohio. Their marketing advisor told them they should have their faces in their ads, so as I was driving down the road a couple years ago, while visiting in Ohio, I came upon a billboard and almost lost control of my car, because, there, as big as you please were the faces of beloved family. Their smiles were genuine. I know this, because I know THEM, but would other people see those smiles the same way I saw them?

Faces are telling, and they can be used in various ways. How about those two small children that want to see ya in a Kia? Or that little girl that sells roofing for her dad? It's hard to understand some of the things she's saying, but we certainly get the message, that we should buy from her father's company because she's cute and why would a small child lie to us?

And those faces that make up Mt. Rushmore. If you've never been there, you should go. There is something about being there in person, and wondering about the admiration for these men that was had by the person who initiated this huge endeavor oh so many years ago.

Then there are those faces presented to us by a good photographer. The photographs following the 9/11 attack come to mind. We have no questions about what we're seeing when we view those photos. They show fear, despair, crushing grief, fatigue and even anger. Those faces can be trusted to represent what they are feeling because in these cases, the photos were candid shots in a city under attack. These are photos that cause a plethora of emotions to rise within us.

We are also familiar with what is called a poker face; a face that shows no emotion, so we're not sure what they have up their sleeve...maybe an ace of spades?

And money. There are faces on our currency because someone thought these people were important enough to be shoved in a billfold, and brought out every time we make a purchase, and those faces are subject to change. In fact, there was an effort made to put Harriet Tubman's picture on a piece of currency, but unfortunately, that one was swept under the rug, and I doubt that too many of you in here even remember reading about that in the news.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus is in the temple being backed into a corner by the Pharisees and the Herodians. They want to trap him into saying something that may be used against him. So, they question him with their best poker faces. "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with the 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?"

These are true statements about Jesus. He is always sincere, speaks the truth to everyone he comes across, and he treats the tax collectors, the prostitutes and those who work hard to live by the golden rule, as equals. No one is greater or lesser in the eyes of Jesus. We have all heard about some who would say that their wealth is due to God showing them divine favor. Well, how does that happen if we are all seen as equals in the eyes of God in Christ?

But the Pharisees want to try and trip up Jesus because you know, they live their life according to the letter of biblical law, or so they say, so they push those ten commandments, and the first two have importance to them when talking about paying taxes.

We all know the first commandment is about having no other gods before the one true God and the second commandment refers to worshiping idols, so maybe paying taxes is like creating another god, or worshiping money, possessions, what have you, and treating them as idols...things that might become more important than the one true God, and they want to know how Jesus feels about this.

Jesus knows he's being put to the test by these people who ask this question. He's aware of their abilities to stir up trouble, and so he asks them why they are putting him to the test, calling them hypocrites because, you know, they were heaping all that praise on Jesus, and not really meaning it.

Jesus says, "Show me the coin used for the tax," and they brought him a denarius. He said to the group, "Whose head is this and whose title?" They replied, "the emperor's." Then Jesus said to them, "So, give the emperor the things that belong to him, and give to God, the things that are God's." It seems simple enough, doesn't it? Tiberius was the emperor at the time, so his face was the one on the denarius.

After they hear what Jesus says, we are told they were amazed, and they left him and went away. You can almost hear them saying, "foiled again!"

Everyone is required to pay taxes. It's how we get good roads and schools, and we pay it out of obligation, not because we are setting those things higher than God. We need good roads, clean water, top-notch learning institutions. It's part of our daily bread that God gives us each day. And so, we too, pay what is required of us.

There are times, though when money becomes our god. We give in to some of the faces we see on television or in ads that are pushing those new Kias, or treatments that take away those horrible lines and wrinkles that we women and probably some men, have worked so hard to earn. I remember recalling how everything was so clear after the removal of my cataracts and then I looked in the mirror and saw wrinkles that I was unable to see before the surgery. But life put those wrinkles there. They're a part of who I am. They're a part of my face that tells people I am true to myself.

What we learn in this scripture is that you can't claim that God has all authority and then act as if YOU are the one who has it all. The challenges that Jesus faced are also the challenges WE face. We must be wary of being tricked by the faces of those who wish to make us feel less than...those who make us feel like we could be on a higher level of society if we bought this or owned that.

But we also need to be sure that what people see in OUR faces is truth and love and grace. Whatever we can do to bring wholeness, transformation and healing to others in this world is resistance to the worldview; it's resistance to worshipping the things of this world.

We were made in the image of God. When we look at each other, or in the mirror, is that what we see? Is that what we think about? Or do we see our career, what we look like, the clothing we wear, the company we keep and what the world has made of us?

We were baptized in the living waters of Christ. We were marked and sealed with the cross of Christ, forever. Our own image of us is so different from what God in Christ sees in us because our image, as seen by God, is also in the marks engraved in Jesus' hands. God's image is what we should see in each other. God's image is what we should become when we set out to make disciples as Jesus told us in his great commission.

So, we follow the law, and we pay our government what is owed our government. It's a matter of ethics and morals. If we don't pay our government what is owed our government, then we're not showing very much love to our neighbor.

Programs that provide food and shelter to those living in the margins of society will be taken away if we don't give the government what is owed to the government. We've seen the faces of those who live in the margins, and we know that they are loved as much by God in Christ as WE are loved...remember? He shows no partiality?

And if we want to give to God what is God's, then we follow the greatest of the commandments, which is "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

If we want to give our complete devotion to God, then we do what is required of us to show love for our neighbor, and if that means paying your taxes, then that's what we do. If that means setting up programs to feed and clothe those less fortunate in our neighborhoods, then that's what we should do.

If you want your face to be a face that is remembered, as much as a face on a precious coin, then let God's love shine through, and allow it to be a face of compassion and kindness in a world that needs both of those things so very badly right now. God loves us. God is with us. Amen.