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“Whose image? Whose name?” The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (10/22/2023, Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost)

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Let us pray, Almighty God,
may the words of my mouth and the meditations
of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sights, O Lord,
our strength and our redeemer, in the name of God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am of a generation that now at the right old age of 45,
I can say that I have played video games my entire life.
From the Atari 2600 on our 13-inch black and white TV
to the hyper-realism of modern gaming,
I don't spend all my time on the gaming laptop.
I still have time to read and prepare sermons
from time to time.

But I have found certain types of games
in particular to be very relaxing, almost meditative,
de-stressing, allowing my brain a chance to relax
and engage with the world in a different way.
One such game is, wait for it, American Truck Simulator,
which is pretty much exactly what you think.
You drive big rigs, you take on a garage,
you begin delivering goods, you drive around
until you can expand your business, new trucks, new trailers,
et cetera.

And I did something on this game recently
believe it or not, that made me think
about our gospel passage for today.
So this is a simulator, not an arcade game,
meaning it has the ability to replicate real life conditions
as much as possible.

It will rain, there are crosswinds,
it'll blow your truck across the interstates,
there's toll booths, you get tired, you have to rest,
your truck takes on damage, you have to get gas, et cetera.
And one of those realistic things about the game
is red lights and speed limits.

So yes, you can find yourself in the game

sitting at a red light.

At one point I got annoyed with that
and I went into the options and I turned off red lights
and speed limits.

So now I can run red lights and I can drive as fast as I want
and I don't have any consequences.

And yet, I feel as though this has actually
made the game less entertaining.

There's not as much challenge involved now.

I can get my deliveries done so fast.

I don't have to worry about getting a traffic ticket.

I don't have to look over my shoulder.

And as I have found, I can drive too recklessly
and damage my truck or get in more accidents
than I otherwise should.

Because red lights and speed limits,
those are the domain of the Emperor or Caesar.

And this game made me thankful for Caesar,
who helps us to restrain our impulses in such a way
that we can live together more safely.

There is a real set of temptations with this passage.

One is to preach a sermon that attempts
to give some grand statement about what Jesus means
for all time regarding the relationship of church and state.

Or to preach a sermon that has nothing but negative things
to say about Caesar, that is, human government
and the political realm.

Or nothing but positive things to say
about human government and the political realm.

So I'm going to say some things about Caesar here,
both positive and negative, but my real concern,

I hope and pray, is to bring us in line
with what Jesus wants to say about God and about us
and about how we are to think of our place in this world.

This broken and damaged world ruled by Caesars
that God nevertheless loves fiercely and deeply.

To begin, we need to remember that Jesus lived
in a politically volatile age.

And that Matthew's gospel was written
in a politically volatile age.

Just in case we look at our own politically volatile age
and think that we somehow have it worse or better.

When Jesus was born, Rome had been a republic
for about 500 years, but the century before Jesus's birth
was quite volatile indeed.

Civil wars, the assassination of Julius Caesar
about 40 years before Jesus was born,
another struggle for power.

And finally, this man named Octavian
gets this name Augustus or divine one

given to him by the Roman Senate.

This is a man who had emerged sort of as the sole Roman leader and now the first Roman emperor about 20 years before Jesus was born.

The contrast between these two figures, Jesus and Caesar is really striking.

One is given a title by the illustrious Roman Senate having a seat of power and influence wealth and an army to command.

He is called Lord and Savior by his subjects.

He is the bringer of an era of peace and prosperity beyond which nothing could compare of his reign.

The Roman poet Virgil says, there will be no ends, meaning his line of rulers will be on the throne forever.

And so the coinage reflected this new reality.

Images of people had never been on coins before.

These were new times right for new ideas, new technology.

When Jesus was a teenager, a man named Tiberius took over.

There was some unsteady and uneasy transition in the line of succession.

Tiberius needed to double down on what was called the imperial cult or the worship of the emperor.

And so the coin that was given to Jesus in this story says, Tiberius Caesar, divine son of the divine Augustus, the high priest of Rome.

On the other hand, there's Jesus of Nazareth.

The contrast could not be greater.

A common name Jesus, a common hometown, 12 fishermen for followers, no power, no influence beyond the very limited scope.

Ministry in Galilee, the backwater of the backwater, ministry to outcasts, support, the lame, the blind children.

Among a people, the Jews of Palestine that the Romans simply could not understand.

Called them atheists.

Called their religion a superstition.

And so in the temple, the highest and holiest places on earth for his people, Jesus is asked a question about the empire.

Look, the Jews knew empires and they knew what empires did.

They remembered what the Babylonian empire had done 600 years previous to the first temple.

They had destroyed it completely.

Maybe this new empire is different.

Maybe they won't be so empire-y.

Through their puppet rule or herod, they had after all made the temple an amazing complex, adding new and wonderful things.

I mean, it was amazing.

They added a parish hall.
They had a new courtyard.
It was the Saint Olvins of its day.
And so hoping to trap Jesus in the middle
of all of this political turmoil,
these two groups, the Herodians and the Pharisees
who were actually enemies of one another,
asked Jesus this question, is it lawful to pay taxes
to the emperor?
Now, because of the way I started this sermon
and my age and my generation,
you should know that the Princess Bride
is probably the most influential movie of my childhood.
Yeah, go ahead.
And there is a famous scene in this movie
where someone is trying to get the better
of someone else and those of you who know
will recognize the following lines.
It's so simple.
All I have to do is divine it from what I know of you.
Are you the sort of man who would put the poison
into his own goblet or his enemies?
Now a clever man would put the poison into his own goblet
because he would know that only a great fool
would reach for what he was given.
I am not a great fool,
so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of you.
But you must have known I was not a great fool.
You would have counted on it,
so I can clearly not choose the wine
in front of me.
It's a great scene and you have this setup
for this sort of impossible choice, right?
This impossible decision.
And I feel that way about this question
that was put to Jesus,
the answer to the question is actually so transparent, right?
It's so clearly no.
Of course you shouldn't pay taxes to the Roman emperor,
the denarius, the coin of the tax itself
violates at least two of the 10 commandments.
It contains an image of a supposed deity.
It calls something other than God, a God.
In addition, this tax to the Romans
is a payment to the oppressor.
The ones constantly threatening the Jewish way of life,
the worship of God and the temple,
so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of me.
But yes, of course you should pay the tax.
It's the law.

The Romans have been the benefactors of the Jews.
They helped to rebuild the temple with Herod's help.
And besides, if you were to say publicly,
that you shouldn't pay taxes to the emperor,
the Roman troops stationed all around
would not think too kindly of that conclusion.
So I can clearly not choose the wine in front of you.
I want to focus on Jesus' questions, though.
Two questions, each with two very important words.
Who's picture is this and who's name?
Who's picture is this and who's name?
In other words, to whom does this coin belong?
When Jesus says, give to Caesar what is Caesar's
and give to God what is God's.
The verb he uses there really means
to give back to someone a thing that they already possessed
to return it to them.
So, return to Caesar what belongs to Caesar
and return to God what belongs to God.
Think of it this way.
If you give back to Caesar what is already Caesar's,
you may be temporarily satisfied.
For the logic of this exchange is the logic of the world.
You pay Caesar to be your protector.
You pay Caesar so that you may be left alone,
even though this doesn't always happen.
You pay Caesar so you can drive from point A to point B
on a good road.
You pay Caesar simply what belongs to him, no more, no less.
You pay Caesar out of fear, maybe out of respect,
but probably not love.
You pay Caesar so that in this reciprocal relationship
you can be safe.
You pay Caesar for the red light, for the speed limit.
The world of Jesus bore Caesar's image.
It still does today.
The world bears the imprints of violence,
of war, of conquest.
The world bears the image of the triumph
of human government and ingenuity.
And the world bears the image of the failures
of human government and ingenuity.
The world bears the image of progress and regression.
I think of the hundreds of thousands of lives lost
in the trenches of World War I as an image,
a picture, an icon of Caesar, all of that waste
for a few hundred feet territory.
The Roman Empire was meant to be an empire
of world historical destiny,
that potentiality toward which the world had always been moving.

New peoples were meant to be conquered
so that this destiny could continue.
And so the national and linguistic categories
were meant to disappear over time
so that all the world belonged to Rome.
If you give back to Caesar, what is Caesar's
and stop there, then you belong to Caesar.
But we don't stop there.
We can't stop there because of what Jesus gave for us.
Caesar will always take more than you give.
And God will always give more than we take.
Think of what Jesus gave to Caesar ultimately
or actually what Caesar took from Jesus, his own body,
his own life.
But Jesus belongs to God ultimately, not to Caesar.
And so God indicated Jesus by raising him from the dead.
God showed us that even if our money, our bodies,
even if our lives are taken by Caesar,
everything belongs to God.
And God will always take back what is God's.
That's what the word redeem means.
God takes back what is God.
God redeems us, buys us back, purchases us at the cost
of God's own body and blood.
Whose picture is this?
Whose name is this?
What is the thing that has been stamped on me
on my very self?
It is the image of God.
You are the image of God.
This is why images were forbidden in the Ten Commandments.
Because the real picture of God is humanity.
We are the image bearers.
We are the picture.
We are the reflection of God.
Whose name is this?
What name has been stamped on your very self?
It is the name of God, fully alive in me
and fully alive in you.
At our baptism, we are named, stamped,
and sealed as Christ's own forever.
No Caesar can ever take that name,
that stamp, that seal away from us.
So what does it mean to give back to God?
What is God's?
To give back the image of God in us,
to live each day with gratitude for the gift that is life,
the gift that is life in the kingdom.
To give back to God what is God's is to escape
the traps and snares of this world,

the violence and enmity and hatred of its Caesars.
To give back to God what is God's is to live at peace
with one's self and with the world around us.
To give back to God what is God's is to live eternally.
It is to receive, in fact, much more than we give.
At the right one service at 730,
when we present the offerings to the altar,
we say, all things come of the O Lord
and of thine own have we given thee.
It's a recognition that all that we have is a gift.
And when we give it back to God,
we are simply yet profoundly giving thanks
for what God is and for who God is.
And so I want to leave you today simply
with the words of Jesus ringing in your ear.
Who's image is this?
And whose name?
Amen.