

Sermon – Heads and Faces
Sunday, October 19, 2014
Scripture Readings – Exodus 33:15-23, Matthew 22:15-22
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Our first scripture reading, Exodus chapter 33 verses 15-23, finds Moses doing damage control after the incident of the golden calf. Worried about the state of God's covenant with Israel, Moses in the preceding verses has boldly addressed God, demanding reassurances of God's presence and favor in long monologues that leave little room for God to respond. Here in our reading, Moses makes a final demand of proof of God's favor, and God is finally able to respond with deepest reassurances. Hear now God's holy word.

15 And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. 16 For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth." 17 The Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." 18 Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." 19 And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The Lord"; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. 20 But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." 21 And the Lord continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; 22 and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; 23 then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

Our second scripture reading, Matthew chapter 22, verses 15 through 22, finds Jesus being tested by those threatened by his teachings. As his message of the good news of God's compassionate justice challenged those with earthly power, he faced opposition from those with such power, frightened by a world other than the one they knew. Hear now what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "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. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 21 They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." 22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Let us pray: O Lord our God, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, that we may be obedient to your will and live always for your glory. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The title of the sermon: Heads and Faces

The text: *"You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."* Exodus 33:20

I just heard about a book that I can't wait to read. It's written by Martin Copenhaver, a UCC pastor, professor, and current seminary president (who is, full disclosure, the father of a friend), and the book is called "Jesus is the Question". Martin was interested in Jesus' frequent strategy of answering a question with a question of his own, and so he went through the gospels and counted how many questions Jesus asks versus direct answers he gives. His findings? Through the four gospels, Jesus is asked 183 questions, asks 307 questions, and gives direct answers only three times.

This book was on my mind this week as I sat with our reading from Matthew. Jesus eventually gives an answer in this reading, but it is far from direct. In fact, this story is Jesus at his most complex.

Some background, first. Because after only two months, I think already you know that's one of my favorite parts.

The Herodians and the Pharisees conspire together to trick Jesus. Now, the Pharisees are fairly well known to those of us who read the gospels. Often painted as the bad guys, they were one group of Jewish religious leaders among many, and were effectively the ministers of their day. They cared deeply about the Law, about the proper interpretation and application of Scripture, and they coordinated and oversaw Temple worship services and activities. They existed in an uneasy relationship with the imperial colonial power, Rome; not radical enough to be a threat, as Temple authorities, they really would have preferred an independent Jewish king and state.

The Herodians were not their best friends. The Herodians, as we can see in their name, were the supporters of the Jewish king, Herod, a king chosen by the Roman authority. As such, the Herodians were incredibly loyal to the Roman Empire, and didn't care too much for Torah or the Temple.

The Pharisees and the Herodians disagreed about EVERYTHING. For them to work together shows us very clearly that Jesus was making everyone nervous.

So they come to him. They flatter him, telling him how well known he is for telling truth and not getting involved in political maneuvering, and they ask him an impossible question—should Jews pay taxes to the emperor? If he says yes, the Pharisees will have reason to denounce him for being a bad religious Jew who supports the oppression of the common person, and if he says no, the Herodians will take news of Jesus' seditious talk back to the powers that be.

So instead of answering, he asks for the coin used to pay the tax.

Now, you may have guessed that I like Jesus, but this is a genius move on his part. Having them bring out the physical object they're talking about is a brilliant rhetorical device.

--and maybe also a way for him to buy himself some thinking time—

But it also makes the point about who among them has the money of the empire on them—and it's not Jesus.

And Jesus asks another question: whose head, and what title?

The emperor's head, naturally. The text doesn't tell us what the emperor's title is, because everyone would have known: "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus"

Son of the divine!—This coin names the emperor as the Son of God.

This is idolatrous for Jews, but Jesus lets that speak for itself.

--Then Jesus gives an answer that is stunningly complex in its simplicity: Give to the emperor what is the emperor's, and give to God what is God's.

His listeners in the story are mostly just impressed that he managed to escape their question, but this has remained a confusing and complicated answer over the ages.

It has been used to support paying taxes, and it has been used to support not paying taxes (for after all, doesn't everything ultimately belong to God?); it has been used to say that one's civic engagement has nothing to do with one's religious beliefs and actions, or that Jesus didn't care one way or another what we do with our money and how we act as citizens, or that Jesus was insisting it is a religious duty to be civic-minded and pay taxes.

And just to confuse things more, we must remember that earlier on in Matthew, Jesus talked about how no one can serve two masters; and that the one thing Jesus talks about more than any other topic is money.

I'm not going to talk about whether or not we should or shouldn't pay taxes: but I do want us all to remember that Jesus was a part of a colonized and oppressed people in one of the most famous empires in human history—no say, no vote, no representation—no citizenship, even--- simply the demand to pay taxes.

And they are living in a very precarious time, and in a precarious situation: the Pharisees' entire realm of power—the Temple—is going to be destroyed in only a few decades: the empire had ultimate power of life and death.

But our story from Exodus also centers on a human encounter with vast power: only this time it's Moses, and the power is God.

The golden calf incident is only recently over, and Moses has talked God out of destroying the people of Israel, but now Moses is a bit panicked, and is up on the mountain talking at God, desperately trying to get as many reassurances as he can that God will protect them and show them favor.

It's actually kind of a funny and sweet exchange: Moses talks and talks and talks, asking question after question; God calmly and patiently assures Moses that God loves them and will care for them; and then Moses is off again.

This whole exchange builds up to this moment we've read: Moses arriving at his real request: he wants to see God, and the fullness of God's glory, because, to him, this will be the ultimate sign of favor, and the way that the Israelites will be distinct from all other people on earth. His courage and boldness in discussion with God reminds me of something Martin Luther wrote: If

you're going to pray, you may as well ask for what you want, because you never know how God will work.

And God answers kindly, and lovingly: you know who I am, and that I love you, and I will pass by you for you to see, but you cannot see my face and live.

To me, there is something so powerful about the contrast between these two stories: the head of the emperor, molded and stamped onto coins made by human hands as a sign of power, to demonstrate exactly who has control over the lives of his people, passed back and forth, exchanged again and again, stuck in a pocket, tossed around, examined, felt, rubbed down by use, and used by Jesus as an object lesson.

And then there's the face of God: unseen, and unknown, hidden from all, because to see it is to be entirely overwhelmed and undone.

Both stories are of human encounter with power.

But in one, the power takes, and in the other, the power gives.

Not only has God given to Moses by granting his request, but Moses will come down from the mountain changed, built up, added to, transformed—the people will know he has seen God.

The empire takes, but God gives.

And God requires something from us, certainly: but God gives: God gives even to the extent of showing Moses God's full glory, simply because Moses asked.

Jesus' answer about paying taxes is as confusing and complex today as it was then, and I can't in good conscience recommend it for tax advice:

But what it does tell us is that giving to God is not the same as giving to the emperor.

I looked up the Greek, because of course I did. The word Jesus uses is *apodidomi*: a very common verb. And as is the case with common words, it has a wide range of meanings. Within the New Testament, it is used to describe the paying of taxes, the paying of wages, rewards given by God, the giving of the witness to the resurrection, the simple act of handing a book to another person, and even, I was moved to see, to describe the giving of Jesus' body to his friends.

Apodidomi can and does mean the paying of taxes or debts or the sale of something for one's own profit; but it also can and does mean giving back, or restoring.

Jesus is clearly intelligent, as we've seen in this story by his request for a denarius. He is also Jewish, and was immersed in Hebrew, a language built on intricate and complex word play. So I am convinced that Jesus is doing the same thing here; that he uses this most common of words to escape the trap laid for him by those interested only in preserving their own power and authority, but most importantly, he engages in this word play to teach his listeners then as well as his listeners today that giving to empire is not the same as giving to God.

That when we give to empire and when we engage with empire, we render a duty—that, good or bad, we give within human structures and institutions, which no matter how well meant cannot escape connotations of corruption, of abuse of power, and of taking for profit.

But when we give to God, we are engaged in giving back, in a powerful act of restoration. Because when we give to God, we are giving to the One who gives to us and who restores us.

The empire takes, but God gives.

God requires something from us, yes: but what does God require of us? To live justly, to love with kindness, and to walk humbly with God. What God requires of us does not take from us; rather, what God requires of us builds us up; restores us, transforms us, as Moses was transformed.

What God requires of us is to open our lives to the presence of God, to desire and invite God's glory into the living of our lives, and to offer that overwhelming and unending glory to every person we meet.

Thanks be to God.