

Date: October 16, 2005

SUNDAY: Ordinary 29

SERMON: God's Icons

Text(s): Matthew 22:15-22; 1 Thess. 1:1-10

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Let's begin with a question: how many of you, when you hear or see the word "icon," immediately think of those little graphics we see on our computer screens every day—those little pictures that when you click on them, start your programs or open your files? How many of you immediately think instead of the sort of religious pictures, usually painted on wood, that are often found in many churches, particularly in the Greek or Russian Orthodox tradition?

I suspect that what we have here is an instance of a technology generation gap. Not too many years ago, there probably would have been few if any who raised their hands to indicate they associate the word icon with computers. Twenty years ago, nearly everyone who heard the word, if they attached any meaning to it at all, would have thought of religious icons. But today, it's largely become a computer word.

There is a common element of meaning, however, in religious icons and computer icons. Both are, in a very real sense, "ways in" or doorways to a deeper reality.

A religious icon, for people whose religious traditions value them, are doorways into an encounter with God. By meditating on the icon while praying, they find themselves drawn into an encounter where eternity opens before them, and where they become open to eternity. The physical reality of the icon embodies or incarnates (to use a theological term central to Christian faith) the non-physical, invisible-to-the-physical-eye reality of God. The icon is not the reality itself; but it's more than simply a depiction; it's a way in to the reality it represents. It mediates an encounter with the reality it represents.

The same is true of computer icons. That little blue "W" in a white square that's on your

computer desktop is not the word-processing program called "Word;" it's a "way in" to the program that allows you to produce documents.

Our English word "icon" is simply a transliteration of the Greek work *eikon*, which means "image" or "likeness." In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus uses this term "icon" in a question he asks his opponents, in answer to their trick question, "*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?*" If he says yes, it is lawful to pay the poll tax that the Romans imposed on their subjects, his own followers will have reason to call him a collaborator and traitor to his own people. If he says no, it's not lawful, then his opponents can report him to the Romans who will undoubtedly arrest him as a rabble-rouser and charge him with sedition against Rome. It's one of those "damned if you do, damned if you don't" sorts of questions.

But Jesus evades the trap by answering their question with one of his own. Picking up a coin that has a picture of Caesar stamped on it, he asks, "*Whose icon is this? Whose image is this? Whose likeness is this?*"

And the reply comes back, "*Caesar's.*" And then Jesus steps neatly out of the trap by saying, "*Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.*"

That seems, on the surface, to be a simple and clever response, but it produces an extraordinary reaction in Jesus' hearers—a reaction all out of proportion to the question or the response: "*When they heard this, they were amazed (literally, struck dumb with awe) and they left him and went away.*" If Jesus were simply making the obvious point that there are two realms of authority, God's and Caesar's, and each one has its legitimate, but differing, claim on our allegiances, his opponents' reaction would make little sense. Something much more profound is implied here than a simple affirmation that while we may owe taxes to Caesar, we owe other things to God.

The key to his opponents' thunderstruck reaction is implicit, though not actually spoken,

in that question of his, *“Whose image, whose icon, is this?”* When they reply that it’s Caesar’s image on the coin, the naturally implied next question is *“Where, then, is God’s icon? Where is God’s image?”* Caesar’s image is on the coin. The coin is the symbol of Caesar’s reality, of Caesar’s power. Behind that icon, stands the Roman legions who conquered their land and who enforce the peace of Rome throughout the empire. Behind that icon is the Roman governor who administers their daily affairs. Behind that icon is the immense wealth and economic power of the empire, wealth in which they participate through trade. The coin with Caesar’s icon on it is a *“way in,”* a way of access to all of that. But where then do we look to find God’s icon, God’s image, so that we can give to God what belongs to God?

Jesus’ listeners are not slow to grasp his meaning. They may be too clever by half in their trick questions, but they’re not stupid, and their astonishment at his answer, and the reason they walk away dumbfounded is because they realize immediately the implied answer to his implied question. Where is God’s image? Well, it’s in them, of course. It is they themselves, as human beings, who are the bearers of the image of God, the icons of God. Of course! They knew that. They knew the creation stories in Genesis as well as Jesus did. *“So God made humankind in his own image [or icon]; in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.”*

So when Jesus says, *“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s,”* his opponents rightly grasp it as an answer so radical that it turns every preconceived notion, every assumption about the way the world works on its head. It immediately puts a whole new slant on the question of to whom or what we give our allegiance. Of course, Caesar has a certain allegiance that is due him; it’s his icon, his image on the coin, isn’t it? But Caesar’s realm of authority is always a derived authority. For Caesar himself is a human being, stamped with

the icon, the image of God. So Caesar and all his pomp, all his wealth, all his power, all his brute force, is ultimately subject to God. He may not know it, he may not accept that fact, he may think he is the supreme reality and power in the world but in fact, Caesar and all that he possesses is a wholly-owned subsidiary of God. And therefore, Caesar’s claim on other human beings can never, never, never be an ultimate claim. Caesar can never command our ultimate obedience. Caesar can never stamp his image on us the way he stamps it on his coins. We are already stamped by a higher authority than Caesar. We are icons of God.

That is why Christians make so much fuss about this notion we call the Doctrine of the Incarnation; as St. John puts it, *“the Word became flesh and lived among us. . .”* Or in St. Paul’s phrase, *God was in Christ, reconciling the world.”* The *“way in”* to God is through human beings. That’s why we put such a high value on human life. That’s why we hold life sacred. That’s why we don’t tolerate murder. That’s why we believe it’s evil to discriminate against other people on the basis of color or ethnic origin or culture or social class or economic status or sexual orientation. That’s why our Maine Conference of the UCC and the Maine Council of Churches has taken such a strong stand supporting the legislation passed last March that guarantees civil rights to persons who are gay. It’s why we need to vote *“No”* on the referendum question that seeks to overturn that law. To discriminate against others for whatever reason or to abuse them is to despise their identity as bearers of God’s image. It is to deny God’s ultimate authority and reality, and assign ultimate reality to Caesar instead. And at any point, when Caesar’s claims presume to encroach upon the image of God in other people, then Caesar has become an idol, and to the extent that we allow Caesar’s claims to our ultimate allegiance to prevail, we become idolaters.

Caesar has his place to be sure. Not all of

Caesar's claims are in opposition to God's. When Caesar does not attempt to place his claims above God's, then they may be legitimate. But discerning which of those claims are legitimate and which are usurping the claims of God is not easy.

Early Christian martyrs went to their deaths in the Roman Coliseum when they found God's claims and Caesar's in irreconcilable conflict. The Christian villagers of Le Chambon in France risked their lives to save Jewish children from deportation to the Nazi death camps rather than obey Caesar's edicts. Archbishop Romero of El Salvador, in the very presence of Caesar's assassins, boldly stood at the altar during Holy Communion and denounced the authorities for their systematic abuse and violence against the poor of that land, and moments later was shot dead by those assassins as he lifted the chalice representing the sacrificial blood of Christ.

Caesar's claims are always with us. I don't mean to suggest that Caesar is always the government or that none of Caesar's claims are legitimate. Caesar may be the government, but Caesar may also be the corporation we work for or the voice of the popular culture forcing its values upon us with the persuasive and very loud assistance of the television media. Caesar may be a particular political ideology that calls for our ultimate allegiance. Caesar might, at times, even be the institutional church. Where do we find the courage and the wisdom to discern whether we are listening to Caesar's claims or to God's, and whether Caesar's claims are legitimate or whether they in conflict with God's? It's not at all easy to discern where Caesar's claims clash with God's, is it? But discerning where those two realms of authority, those two claims upon our allegiance come together or conflict is crucial; it certainly was, in the most literal sense, for Jesus. The cross on which he was crucified is the tangible symbol of the price that is often paid when someone puts allegiance to God's claims

above those of Caesar.

St. Paul, in our epistle lesson, provides us with a clue that can help us in that discernment process. He commends the Thessalonian Christians for their practice of the three cardinal Christian virtues, faith, hope and love. But it is the adjectives he attaches to those virtues that really give us practical help. He speaks of "*the work of faith, the labor of love, and the steadfastness of hope.*"

Faith, or ultimate trust in God, as Paul himself says, is a gift from God. God enables us, by grace, to trust our lives to God. We don't earn this gift by being good. We can't *work it up*. But we can and must *work it out*. Faith has to be worked out, lived out, in the daily decisions we make about our conduct, our direction in life. That's where the work comes in. Day by day, we have to decide how our trust in God will be made real and concrete.

If faith must be worked out in the real world of daily life, it has to be focused and directed by love, the second virtue Paul mentions. And love, Paul says, is a labor. All parents, and particularly mothers, know all too well the labor involved in bringing a new life into being. Love is labor because it is costly. It's no labor to love someone who is lovable. It's not labor to bounce my new grandson on my knee and watch him giggle and laugh. That's pure fun.

But it is labor to put one's own self-interests in second place and put the other's interests first. To love someone else truly is to recognize that they are stamped with God's image too— they are, for us, the way in to God. And the less naturally lovable they are, the harder the labor is. But the reward, as with giving birth, is new life, new family, new community, a new future for humanity.

The work of Faith and the labor of love are not possible unless they are grounded in steadfast hope. Hope isn't wishful thinking; it's not "I hope it won't rain for our church retreat

next week,” or “I hope Susie scores a goal in her soccer game tomorrow.” Nor is it an easy optimism that says, “Well I’m sure everything will work out for the best. There’s a reason for everything. So we’ll just hope for the best.” That’s not hope as Paul or Jesus or the other writers of the New Testament understand it. No, hope is the courage to act in light of a future that we are convinced is already coming into being, despite all appearances to the contrary. Hope is Martin Luther King, Jr., saying, “I have a dream that one day my children will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the quality of their character,” and then giving wings to his dream by leading a movement to defy Caesar’s edict of racial segregation. Hope is a woman with terminal breast cancer, who, in October, with only weeks to live, is found patiently planting next spring’s tulips and daffodils in her garden. Hope is Albert Schweitzer laying aside two brilliant careers—renowned concert organist and internationally-recognized theologian, and getting a medical degree so he could bury himself in the fever-ridden jungles of Gabon, “for Jesus’ sake,” as he put it.

Faith, hope, and love— that’s how we keep God’s claims and Caesar’s claims in their proper relationship. By putting our faith to work, by laboring at love, and by being steadfast in hope. That’s what it means to be God’s icons, the bearers of God’s image. We provide, through our very lives, the way in to God for others, and a way out for the world from its deep despair and hopelessness.