

“Sense of Self”
OT 29A-17
Genesis 1: 26-31
Matthew 22: 15-22
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“Sense of Self”

Who here has heard of a philtrum? Anybody? Believe it or not, you all have one. And you brought it with you today! It’s the little indentation between our upper lip and nose. And there’s an ancient Hebrew legend that tells a tale of how we all get our philtrum.

As it’s told, when God desires a soul to be born in the world, God sends an angel down to unite soul and seed together in a mother’s womb. The angel then stays with this emerging life amid its mother’s womb, in order to teach it all about who and whose it is. The angel shares lessons on who God is, and how much God loves this new little life. The angel also makes clear that we’re not merely created by God... but we’re created in the image of God.

Then, once the angels has shared all its lessons, and the baby is prepared to enter the world, the angel does its last job... ever-so-softly touching its finger to the top of the baby’s upper lip... as if to say, “Shhh... you must now forget all that I’ve taught you... and come to discover it for yourself as you become who God has created you to be.”

While we don’t teach this story within our faith tradition, I think it does a good job of emphasizing our first lesson this morning. We did not create ourselves... or any part of the life surrounding us. Parents may want to lay claim to their child’s creation... but even before we belong to our parent... or our spouse... or anything else, God proclaims that we belong to God. We even bear God’s image to prove it.

If not in the little indentation above our lips... then at least in the watermarks of baptism upon our heads... and the grace imbued in our hearts.

Granted, we no longer see the water marks on each other’s foreheads. And it’s hard to pinpoint something as real yet invisible as grace.

But isn’t that one of the most important elements faith helps us uncover—who and whose we are?

The world would also like to tell us who we are... but the world’s message is far different from faith’s. The world tells us things like:

You *are* what you look like; the clothes you wear; the company you keep.

You *are* what you do; the job you have; the degree behind your name.

You are *worth* what you have; the possessions you own; the amount in your accounts.

And as we hear these worldly claims over and over again... our sense of self begins to shift... and as our sense of self begins to shift, so, too, do our priorities.

- Priorities seen in the schedules we keep—and the things and causes and people to whom we give our time.

- Priorities are seen in our possessions—and what we try to get, compared to what we seek to give.

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It's this issue of our priorities that lies at the heart of our Gospel lesson this morning, which begins, interestingly enough, with the union of very strange bedfellows—the Pharisees and the Herodians.

The Pharisees, we know, were the liturgical leaders of the Jewish community. They cared deeply about Jewish law and liturgical purity... and were completely offended by the way Jesus so recklessly confronted Hebrew traditions in the way he modeled faithfulness.

The Herodians, on the other hand, cared nothing about Jewish law or religion. Their interests were solely political. They wanted what was best for the Roman empire, which included adequate taxation for their government.

Normally, the Herodians and Pharisees were opponents of each other—they didn't really have any love lost between them. But their disdain for the rabble-rousing Jesus drew them together in an effort to entrap him around what they think are the issues of money... and taxes. Two topics that are still rather sensitive to most folks today.

But the issue is even bigger than taxes. For scholars are very clear, first century Jews paid a lot—and I mean a lot—of taxes. They paid a temple tax to the temple leaders, a land tax, trade and customs tax, and more. These are not the issue at hand.

Rather, the question the Herodians and Pharisees team up to bring to Jesus regards what was known as the “Imperial Tax,” a tax that was paid to Rome in order to fund their occupation of Israel and its land.¹ And because Rome ruled all of the Mediterranean area at this time, this included the empire charging taxes to the Hebrews in Palestine. So, in a very real way, the Jews were being forced by the Romans a tax they knew would only help enable Rome to keep on oppressing them.

And if that wasn't bad enough, the only way to pay this Imperial Tax was with Roman currency... currency that had the image of Emperor Caesar stamped upon it with the title “Son of God.” And every good Hebrew knew just how clear the Torah was on this... Israel was to recognize only one Lord and ruler—the Lord their God. Certainly, Jews considered it idolatrous to recognize the Roman emperor as the Son of God, which the Roman Emperor claimed to be. Just as they viewed it as idolatrous for the Romans to claim ownership of a land that the Jews believed could only belong to God.

So *this* is the tax... and *this* is the currency referenced amid the entrappers question to Jesus. “Jesus, tell us, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

“Should the Hebrews pay a tax to support their oppressor's oppression of them with this money with Caesar's image upon it... Or, Jesus... should faithful Hebrews not pay this tax... and not use this money?”

They think they've got him. If he answers yes... it is lawful, then all the Hebrews will detest him for supporting their oppressor. But if he answers “no,” they know they can have him arrested on charges of sedition, and refusing to support the Roman government.

¹ Eric Shafer, “You're Gonna Have To Serve Somebody” http://day1.org/8023-eric_shafer_youre_gonna_have_to_serve_somebody

But as we know, Jesus refused to take the bait, and instead, reframed the entire issue. “Show me the coin used for the tax.”

They give him the coin. “Hmm. Interesting. Tell me, whose head is this on the coin, and whose title?”

And here I want to be very explicit for a second. The NRSV, the Biblical translation we use, it translates Jesus’ question here as “Whose *head* is this,” “Whose *head* is on the coin?”. But the actual Greek word Jesus used here, *eikon*, is literally translated as “likeness,” or “image.”² So a better translation of his question may be, “Whose *image* do I see on the coin?” “Whose *image* is reflected here?”

Now, of course Jesus knows the answer to his question. He’s no dummy. He understands it’s the emperor’s image he’s looking at. But he asks the question in order to remind everyone not just of the image on the coin... but of the image born within each of them.

“Whose image is on the coin?” he asks.

“Whose image is within each of you?” he implies.

“Whose image do I see when I look at this piece of metal?” he asks.

“Whose image do I see reflected back at me when I look at each of you?” he implies.

“Give, therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

You who bear God’s likeness... You who have been created in God’s image... “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Jesus then leaves it up to each of them to decide for ourselves.

Just as Jesus leaves it up to us to distinguish between what is ours... and what is God’s.

Jesus leaves it up to us to discern the image within us... and the image we would have coming from us.

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Like the whispered, “Shh” pressed upon our lips... it’s hard to remember the truth of who we are much of the time. For we so often forget that who we are as people of faith, is answered by the question of whose we are! Like baptism’s watermarks... it can be hard to see.

But as pastor and scholar Martin Marty articulates so beautifully in a quote we’ve included on the cover of our bulletin, “*If I acknowledge God as the creator, it occurs to me that all I am and have is a gift.*”³ All I am and all I have... is a gift!

This, friends... this... is the basis of Christian stewardship. And it is one of the pivotal reasons why stewardship is such a vital component of discipleship. Environmental Stewardship—caring for creation. Time & Talent Stewardship—putting God at the center of our schedules and priorities. Relational Stewardship—investing in the relationships around us. Financial Stewardship—giving our treasure to help ensure that mission and ministry are funded and growing and that the Good News is spreading.

² Frederick William Danker based upon the work of Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 281.

³ Martin E. Marty, *Giving*, Magazine #1.

You know, too much of the time I think we hear the word stewardship and assume we're talking about the church budget or fiscal numbers... but stewardship is not really about budgets or bills or numbers at all.

Rather, stewardship—more than anything else we do in the life of discipleship—is the discipline of remembering who and whose we are... and then living like it! That's stewardship—remembering who we are and whose we are... and then living that truth out.

So friends, I'd like to invite us—individually and communally—into a season of intentional stewardship. I invite us all to take time these next few weeks to intentionally and prayerfully explore the ways our living reflects who and whose we are. What image are we living for? What image do we actually reflect—in the way we spend our time... in the way we spend our money... in the way we treat those around us... those different from us... the last and the least among us?

We need to ask ourselves... what do our priorities reveal? And if they reveal something we would like to change, what priorities need to be moved down so that other priorities can be moved up?

Jesus leaves it up to us to choose the image we want to reflect. But make no mistake how crucial our choice is. Not for the sake of church budgets... but the sense of self within us, and the good news that is ours to live and ours to spread!