

*Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice. Amen.*¹

God is meeting us today. God comes to meet us in the Gospel right where we are today, the 18th of October in two-thousand and 20. It is almost inconceivable that we are engaging with a story here about political authority, social economy, taxes, and folks cleverly crafting some political and religious gotcha questions. Just like political adversaries across our televisions, across social media, and across this country, Jesus' adversaries are politically maneuvering to leave him spectacularly cornered and spectacularly defeated.

Do you know, one commentary I read about the Gospel, written years ago in fact, had a sentence that began, "This is the first of three debates between Jesus and Jewish leaders ..."² It's unbelievable.

I have a hunch that some of you may have an inner commentary running across your mind wondering where this sermon is headed at the moment, and whether you want to stay to listen, because you are just not sure if you're up for it right now. Which is completely fair.

My commentary on this debate we're witnessing in the Gospel today, though, is about to pivot – and I hope offer you a generative, loving, liberating, and life-giving perspective on what we are seeing play out here today. Zoom fatigue, quarantine fatigue, news fatigue, anxiety fatigue, health alert fatigue, economic crisis fatigue, political fatigue. We need God! And perhaps you are, like I am, coming to the Gospel today – and to this service – to experience something different and counter-cultural from what is out there. Something that does not involve political maneuvers and clever sound bites. You came to hear the Good News of 'God with us' – moving us and calling us deeper into our journey with Jesus Christ.

So move with me now, beyond the bluster and the gotcha questions these political characters try to hold over Jesus, and consider the other character in this Gospel story that the adversaries wind up putting right into Jesus' hand for him to hold – and to use.

That other character in this Gospel story is the coin – a piece of currency in that economy. An economy that Jesus' adversaries have used to prompt this questioning of allegiance to the emperor or to God.

But Jesus pivots from the direction they're heading with their question and turns us ... or rather re-turns us ... around to the two questions at the heart of the challenge. The first is the one we hear him ask. "What is it that bears Caesar's image?" It's the coin. Caesar put his likeness on the coin so that he can be flattered and emboldened by how much money he has and by seeing himself everywhere he turns: in a position he considers of ultimate authority and power.

The second question then, which is not verbalized but rather understood by the faithful, is: "What is it that bears God's image?" The Jewish citizens under Caesar knew (as you and I know from the book of Genesis) that we are created in God's image. Caesar has his coins that are made in Caesar's image. God has God's children, who

¹ Psalm 96:11a.

² Susan Grove Eastman. "Exegetical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 189.

are made in God's image. Caesar's coins are Caesar's currency and they are marked with a stamp of his picture. God's children – you and I – are God's currency, and we are marked with the indelible ink of God's Word on our hearts.

Here's a question I invite you to spend time with and to take with you: How are you God's currency in the economy of God's Kingdom? Or perhaps as Sam Wells, Vicar at St.-Martin-in-the-Fields in London puts it: "How are you rich? How are you poor? How is your neighbor rich? Your neighbor poor? How do you experience I am rich? I am poor?"³

In today's Gospel, Jesus takes a self-absorbed, self-concerned, self-centered and ultimately selfish question and reimagines it, indeed re-turns it, by looking through the lens of the heavenly instead of the earthly. Jesus transfers the question to a theological one: Something that instead is about prayer, sacrament, sacrifice, faithfulness ... and is according to our best interest – reminding us that we are each of God and held by God.

And perhaps you are (like I am) reminded of how people sometimes jokingly speak of others in this way: "He was so heavenly, that he was of no earthly use!" But the richness of what is being revealed before us here, is that by looking at this slippery question through the lens of heaven, and by accepting and bearing the imprint of God in all parts and at all times in our lives, everything becomes about life itself – of ultimate use, worth, and value here on earth: Our lives, lived out for God, given by God in our here, our now, our everything and our everywhere. Every life is marked with that inscription, a holy icon of the One who is its source and its destination.

Many of us – all of us really – journey along a precariously narrow borderland between the Kingdom economy and the worldly economy. We find ourselves living our lives, for instance, litigiously rather than liturgically. Secularly rather than sacrificially and sacramentally. But God calls each of us to use the gifts God gives us to do the work God calls us to do. Participating in this commerce of God's economy where the only "currency" is love. It's how God gives. It is how we are to give, too.

Union with Christ in his coming again creates in the present a restless, forward-looking way of life, in which trust in God's promises motivates discipleship for action in such a way that every area of the world's life is seen in terms of Christ's rule. And this changes everything.

We are each challenged in this; but it's a challenge that births, forms, and nurtures vibrant life: life giving, life sharing, life making, life loving, life long, and life wide. Life in God's economy, which we are called to share abundantly, generously, unconditionally, compassionately, and lovingly. We are to move beyond transaction and into the richness of a real, living relationship, which brings hope, joy, and blessing to us, to others, and to all.

In the words of our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, "If it's not about love, it's not about God."

God is with us, meeting us here today ... and always. Amen.

³ Wells, Sam. "Closing Plenary." Lecture, CEEP Network Conference, Boston, February 23, 2019.