

"Choosing an Image"

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

October 23, 2011 – John Knox Presbyterian Church

Matthew 22:15-22 "Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 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. Tell us, then what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. The he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 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." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away."

In the movie "The King's Speech", the son of King George V, played by Colin Firth, struggles throughout the film to overcome an incredible speech impediment. This made speaking in public or on the radio very embarrassing for the son of royalty. He sought the treatment of many specialist and doctors but the stuttering and stammering prevailed. Firth's character, nick named Bertie, eventually meets up with a rather peculiar speech therapist, named Lionel Logue. A friendship forms between the 2 men. As the story unfolds, Bertie's father, the king, dies and his brother, Edward is next in line for the crown. But Edward lives a rather scandalous life at least in the views of the British political realm and there are rumblings of him having to give up the thrown. In the midst of this, World War II is beginning and it looks like Britain may have to join the effort. The image of the monarchy is unstable. Bertie and Lionel have a meeting where Lyle questions him about the possibility of him becoming king. Bertie is angered by this because to seek the crown from his brother would be treason. He goes to leave and Lionel leaves him with this question, "What are you so afraid of?" I think his fear was in the image of the monarchy being tarnished if the king could not speak correctly. But there was also the fear of the looming hardship of his beloved Britain with Edward as king, especially in the face of war.

Image is important for all of us. Our image may vary in the roles we play. At work, your image maybe how effective or productive you are at your job. Your image may depend on your loyalty to the company. When I was working at FedEx, we use to say that our best employees were the ones that ate, slept and breathed FedEx. It was said they had purple and orange in their blood. In fact, there were t-shirts that were printed by managers with a transfusion container of blood that was half orange and half purple and the shirt read "Blood Type AF". It was though your whole being was about the company!

Today, we are celebrating Children's Sabbath. What kind of images are our children expected to portray? There are a lot of high schools right now battling it out in football and marching band. I remember those days of putting shoe polish captions all over our van that read, "We're #1!" or "Ben Davis Giants Can't be Beat!" I was a Ben Davis Marching Giant. I can still remember the image of me wearing my purple and white letter jacket and thinking I was so cool! I believe I still have that thing.

Some images are harmful and ugly. This past week, I was sitting under the hair dryer, getting my hair done and reading a People magazine. There was an article in there about school bullies. These children torment those who are different than the majority. They zap the self-esteem and self-worth out of their targets. Many times schools and parents of both parties look the other way. This is very sad! In this article, there were 3 children, who ended up taking their own lives due to being bullied at school.

Jesus uses an image to make a point with the disciples of the Pharisees and Herod's men. This story takes place around the same time as Frank's scripture occurred last week. Jesus has made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The heads of the church are trying to trap Jesus into saying something that would justify having him arrested. The trick question for today is, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor Caesar or not?"

Jesus asks to see the coin, which is used to pay the tax. Both the political heads of the church and government hand him a denarius. The coin has the head of Tiberius Caesar stamped on it. This image represented oppression and blasphemy, to handle this coin was offensive or even forbidden by some people in the church. These guys thought they had nailed

Jesus by asking a very political question and cinching it by handing him the coin. For if Jesus answered “No” to the question, he would be charged with treason by Herod’s men. If Jesus answered “Yes” to the question, he would win the favor of the government but show favor to the oppressive emperor and as one commentator put it, “this would scandalize the religious establishment”. They would be out for his arrest in a heartbeat! (Feasting on the Word by Richard E. Spalding, 2011, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 190)

Jesus does not fall into their trap. He comes back not with a political response but a theological one. “Give to the emperor Caesar what is the emperor’s and give to God what is God’s,” answered Jesus. Jesus says, “You make the choice. You choose what image you want.” Caesar may get the money that bears his image. But do we not bear the image of our creator, God? God gives us life, breath and being. We are God’s children and loved deeply as we read the words of Isaiah 49, “Can a woman forget her nursing child? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.” Then if printing our name or image on God’s hands isn’t enough, God pours out his blood for us through Jesus Christ and gives us the Holy Spirit to show us how to live out our faith.

Later in the service, Rev. Lee Dorsey, will be baptizing his grandson Cooper. One commentator shares, “Baptism is the watermark of our true currency.” (Feasting on the Word by Richard E. Spalding, 2011, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 190) When Lee puts the water on Cooper’s head, we will hear the words, “Cooper, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” He will be claimed and stamped by God. He may have other images in his life. He may root for the Colts or wear his school colors or work long hours at his job as an adult but his whole being will be of God. We, the church, will proclaim today that we promise to be the image of Christ for Cooper - to nurture, teach, mentor, support, guide, protect and love him throughout his faith journey.

Next week is Stewardship Sunday, we will focusing on giving of our time, talents and treasure. You will be invited to come forward to place your annual pledge on the table. I want to leave you with one more visual image.

There once was a potter who wanted to make a special pitcher to hold her milk for her cereal every morning. She took all the special measurements and set down to design the perfect pot. She went to her studio, chose the clay and began to turn the wheel. She made a beautiful shape with a perfect handle that fit her hand perfectly. She brushed and fired a glaze that pleased her. It was beautiful!

She took it home, filled it with milk, put it in the refrigerator and went to bed.

The next morning the potter poured a bowl of cereal, opened the refrigerator, and reached for her new pitcher. The pitcher suddenly shouted, “Oh, no you don’t! Keep your hands off!

The potter responded, “I was just going to pour some milk on my cereal.” “No, you’re not,” replied the pitcher. I worked hard to create you, said the potter. I started out with no milk at all, but through hard work and careful stewardship, I am now full of milk. No one’s going to come along and pour out all that I’ve wanted so long to achieve! Well, pondered the potter. “I don’t think you understand the real story here. You see I created you and I made you for the express purpose of filling you with milk so that I could pour it out each morning on my cereal. You were made to pour not to store!”

“A nice story, but I don’t get it,” said the pitcher. “But seeing that you are in need, I am a generous pitcher. I will give you 2 tablespoons of my milk. That should wet the cereal nicely. Everything in moderation – that is what I think!”

The potter looked deeply into the heart of the pitcher, “You’re afraid,” she said, “If you allow me to pour out the milk you will find yourself empty, that you will then be poor, and that I will throw you out and find another pitcher. You don’t realize that if you allow me to empty you, I will have found you to be a priceless pitcher. Then I will continue to fill you to the top over and over and over again, and we will become partners in emptying and refilling you. Perhaps, if you are willing to be emptied more completely and more often, I will find many other bowls of cereal who are longing to be drowned in the love of your giving.”

“And if I don’t believe you and want to play it safe and just keep the milk I have got?” the pitcher inquired.

“You are free to make that choice.” The potter said with a sad voice. “Then I will make another pitcher who is willing to be my partner. I will have to set you on the back shelf of the refrigerator or shelf. You can keep your milk. But after a time, your odor will keep everyone away, and you will have missed the greatest job for which all pitchers are created – the joy of being poured out!” (<http://atonement-denver.org/sermons/year-c/time-after-pentecost-c/consecration-sunday-c>) Amen.