

Exodus 33:12-23

12 Moses said to the Lord, 'See, you have said to me, "Bring up this people"; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, "I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight." ¹³Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.' ¹⁴He said, 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.' ¹⁵And he said to him, 'If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶For how shall it be known that I have found favour 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 favour in my sight, and I know you by name.' ¹⁸Moses said, 'Show me your glory, I pray.' ¹⁹And 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. ²⁰But', he said, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.' ²¹And the Lord continued, 'See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²²and 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; ²³then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.'

Matthew 22:15-22

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

The Image Imprinted on Your Heart

GOLD OR WATER: If you could have ten ounces of gold or ten ounces of water, which would you prefer? Think about that question for a minute, and make no assumptions. Don't assume that when you turn the handle on the faucet that anything is going to come out of it. And don't assume that the many businesses that advertize buying gold are going to be open or in business. Which would you choose; gold or water? That's the kind of question that confronted Moses in our Old Testament lesson, Jesus in our Gospel reading, and you and I in our daily walk with God.

GOLDEN CALF: In today's Old Testament lesson we have a conversation between God and Moses occurring just after Moses crashes the party when all the Israelites are worshiping a golden calf, right after they had abandoned the true God for something more tangible, perhaps more tame-able. A golden calf, after all, doesn't tell them where to go, doesn't lead them to the brink of starvation and dehydration as Moses' God most certainly had. A golden calf is shiny and luxuriant and can make one feel rich. Moses spoils their party and God punishes the people's faithless behavior.

And God seems to have had it with the Israelites, telling Moses, “I’m going to send an angel with you and the Israelites to lead you into the land I told you about, but I’m no longer going with you.” That might seem like a reasonable arrangement. The land God had promised them was supposed to be rich, flowing with milk and honey, the color of gold. And wasn’t that the goal, after all, the land? Moses however sees the serious problem with this arrangement. He speaks boldly to God, saying, “Look, you said that I found favor in your sight, but now you say that you won’t come with me? How will anyone know that these people are your people unless you come with us?” **Moses seemed to understand what was at stake here. What mattered was not the rich land that they were to acquire but the richness of God’s presence with them.** Which is more valuable, gold or water?

WANTS AND NEEDS: Another way of stating this is, *which is more important; what we want, or what we need?* The most sought-after element in the world today may be gold, but if you are dehydrated you must have water, just as if you’re gasping for breath you need oxygen, and all the gold in the world won’t satisfy your thirst, it won’t prevent you from suffocating. We spend a lot of time and energy in pursuit of our wants; we want *good* food, we want *cars*, we want our a *nice* home in a *nice* neighborhood, we want *entertainment* and *vacations*, **and the only reason we can spend so much time and energy pursuing such *nice* things is that our needs are taken care of**, so well taken care of that we forget to recognize *who* takes care of our needs. Ultimately we have to recognize our Creator as the One who brings us life and the elements essential for maintaining life. Moses recognized the supply chain; if you alienate yourself from the supplier, your supplies will soon run out. If you separate yourself from the One who gives you life, your life is eventually extinguished. There were probably many Israelites out there in the desert who would have been quite content going ahead into the Promised Land without the presence of God, Moses recognized the peril of such a move, and he persuaded God not to withdraw his presence.

GOD AS A VERB: But then Moses asked for something that God could not provide him; with a good dose of *chutzpah*, Moses asks to see God’s face. This is an interesting request, because Moses had seen plenty of evidence of God’s presence. He had seen a burning bush. He and the people had seen a pillar of smoke by day, fire by night. They had seen water flow from a rock, and food fall from the sky, but it wasn’t enough. Moses thought that seeing God’s face would satisfy him, and a loving God answered that he could not see God’s face and live. And here is a good place to draw that line of connection between our Old Testament reading and our Gospel reading, because central to Jesus’ lesson is the image of the face of Caesar on a Roman coin. Caesar, who declared himself savior and son of god. Such audacity is not unique to Rome; throughout history there were many kings and emperors and dictators who thought themselves to be divine and demanded that their people treat them as such. And such people spend a lot of time posing, posing for photographs, for paintings, and for sculptors. We imagine kings and queens sitting on thrones, regal and stationary. And this reflects the relationship they have with their “subjects.” A king and queen spend lots of time sitting and posing, while their subjects are expected to work for them. These living gods are as passive as the craven images that people cast to represent other gods. But our God reverses that relationship; our God is a God who is active; he’s seen not simply as a bush, but a *burning* bush, or a whirlwind of smoke, or a whirlwind of fire, *moving* ahead of his people, *leading* them ever forward toward the goal. This is a God who is active in serving his people, feeding them, bringing them water. And in Jesus we see the same relationship manifest. Jesus heals the sick, releases the captives, feeds the hungry, teaches his followers. Our God is too busy to be cast into a craven image. Even Jesus is described in prophecy as one having “no form or majesty that we should look upon him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2), and after the resurrection a lot of folks don’t even recognize that it’s him. Our God seems to avoid being cast into any

image because, quite frankly, he's too busy to allow a casting. In fact I think that God is more of a verb than a noun; God is too busy doing to bother being.

It is our hearts and minds that seem to settle on what is stationary, what is lifeless. We are all too prone to settle upon the gifts more than the giver, the Promised Land rather than the one who leads us there, the mighty dollar that has no life of its own and buys those things that have no life of their own. We are the ones who look for the hard, lifeless gold rather than the fluid, life-giving water. And we forget that God is the acting principle who makes it possible for us to even get distracted and start pursuing lifeless idols.

It's this idolatry issue that Jesus is confronting in today's Gospel lesson, and he uses a coin called a denarius to illustrate his point. The Pharisees and Herodians, who consider Jesus more than a nuisance, ask him publicly if the Jewish people should pay taxes. If Jesus had answered "yes" he would have discredited himself with a crowd that hardly owned a denarius because they were on the verge of starvation, who would have dropped Jesus like a hot potato if he implied that they should pay taxes to Caesar who was fleecing them beyond belief. Of course if Jesus had said "no" his enemies would have put a bug in Pilate's ear and Jesus would be arrested faster than you could say Jack Robinson. So what was he to do?

Well some might say that Jesus was rather crafty, and avoided the "no-win" situation with his often quoted response, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's." But I don't think Jesus was trying to avoid anything. He certainly understood the motives of his enemies, and referred to them as hypocrites, but see what he said after that:

"Show me the coin used for the tax."

Notice that Jesus did NOT reach into his pocket and pull out a coin. Jesus didn't have a coin to pull out, nor did his disciples, nor most likely did anyone in the crowd who followed Jesus. These folks were dirt-poor and likely had not even seen a denarius – it was worth quite a bit.

And whether intentional or not, Jesus' request put his inquisitors on the spot, because *they* managed to produce a denarius, **in the Temple**, where there was not supposed to be any Roman coinage, and the Pharisees in particular would have advocated such a policy. But these particular Pharisees got him a denarius, right there, **in** the temple. So their response to Jesus' request serves to discredit his critics in the eyes of anyone who could see; it exposed them as the hypocrites that they were, telling the people to do one thing while they themselves did the opposite.

But Jesus goes further. "Whose **image** and whose title is there?" "Whose image." Does this ring some bell with you? Perhaps the first chapter of Genesis; "in his image he created us, man and woman." Does it conjure up the commandment, "Thou shalt have NO graven images before thee." They are *in* the temple with a forbidden coin and on it is a forbidden image, and the ones who produce the coin are the Pharisees and Herodians. Can't get much more hypocritical than that, can you?

In response to Jesus' question, "Whose image," the Pharisees answer. "Caesar's." Right: Caesar, who demanded to be worshiped as a god. (If you're keeping score, it's now Jesus 3; Pharisees 0)

And just to add a little insult to injury, Jesus ends this little exchange by saying, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's. Give back to God what is God's."

When Jesus prompts us to "give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," he's not saying there is a clear division between church and state. How much are we supposed to give God? 50%? 60%? More? Less? How can we possibly answer anything less than 100%? God our Creator, our Redeemer and our Sustainer? We who were created in his image and who receive everything we have, the air we breathe, the food we eat, the fellowship we enjoy, did we receive it all from God? So does he not deserve everything we have? Is not everything we claim to own actually his?

Is not everything that brings us joy actually his own doing? The sun that rises and warms the earth, and the birds that sing in the morning light, and the one who sleeps beside us and welcomes us with a "good morning, and the sausage and eggs, were they not provided by our creator? The beauty of music, and of the meadows and of New York Harbor, and of the Outerbridge Crossing at night, and of the delicious food that we eat, was that not God's own doing? So to whom do we owe everything?

Our whole life is about receiving from God and giving back to God. We're like the Israelites in that we are tempted to focus on the gifts and forget about the giver. We may be tempted to worship our own image rather than the God who needs no image, to serve ourselves rather than the poor, the afflicted, the downtrodden, and those who most resemble our Savior. I know that many of you know this already, that the full life, the joyful life, the rich and exciting life is found when we give our lives to Christ and to one another. That's what Jimmy Stewart showed us in "It's a Wonderful Life;" Give until you have nothing left to give, and guess what? The house may be drafty, the menu may be ground beef instead of New York strip, and your vacation may be spent at a public park rather than a private resort, but when you give to others, when you give to God, you get so much more in return, because it is there that you gain the assurance that God's presence goes with you, and though you may never reach the penthouse on the upper west side, you know that someday you will reach the Promised Land.