

October 18, 2020

Our gospel readings for the past several weeks are during passion week. The drama is between Jesus and the religious leaders.

Jesus has just finished telling three parables, stories that the Pharisees interpret to be about them and their hypocrisy. And now they want Jesus arrested, but they are afraid of the crowds. Politics...

So, the religious leaders start a smear campaign... They want to discredit Jesus. The temperature is rising... The plot is thickening... Believe me, this is high drama!

The Pharisees team up with the “Herodians,” the Herodians are Jewish people who’ve become loyal to King Herod. This is an unholy political alliance! They are enemies of each other, but when it comes to Jesus, they are united in a smear campaign...

And they come to ask Jesus a trick question. A question that puts Him between a rock and a hard place, “is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?” If he answers “yes,” the people will dislike him. If he answers “no,” the Herodians will dislike him. And that’s not good... It’s an either / or, no-win situation!

Jesus calmly asks for the coin and asks about the image and the title. Of course, the image belongs to the emperor, Caesar, and the title essentially claims he is God. Which is of course blasphemy! It’s breaking commandment numero uno, you shall have no other Gods before me. It’s idolatry...

When Jesus asks about the image, I’m reminded of the creation story where God said “let us create humankind in our image.” In other words, all of us-- we all bear the image of God. I guess you could say we are like God’s coins in the world.

Today I'd like to reflect with this connection between the image of Caesar, and what it means to be the image of God.

I like to think of the Caesar image as an image we have of ourselves, when we are young, strong and invincible. When we put ourselves at the center of the universe and we create a personal foundation; perhaps a framework from which we see the world and build our identity. It includes things like-- education, principles, values, beliefs, morals... We spend quite a bit of time in our youth and early adulthood, constructing this foundation.

This base is literally who we are, it's a container and it becomes a part of our self-image. We spend a lot of time and energy attending to that self- image.

Franciscan Priest Richard Rohr calls this the task of the first half of life. He says we all need to construct a strong and healthy self-image of who we are... He says that it's vitally important. We need to know our boundaries. We need to know what we stand for... We all need a strong foundation...

And when we have a strong foundation, generally speaking, good things happen to us. It's like following the commandments, generally speaking, good things happen to us.

Richard Rohr, also describes a process in the second half of life that changes us. Sometimes our foundations fall apart. And it's in the putting back together that transformation happens.

Quick story... It's been a privilege for me to be involved with Older Adult Ministry... I've seen first-hand many instances of people who've been shattered by life. Sometimes it was an event, and sometimes it's just plain old aging, just plain old, getting older...

Some of the wisest people I know are people who've gone through some kind of personal tragedy.

My friend Kate, lost her son in a car accident. He had so much to live for, he had just gotten married, and it was all tragically cut short. Kate and her husband were surrounded by their church family, but they still harbored hard questions. How can a good and loving God, let something like this happen? Why were so many people judgmental about how they were grieving?

Kate and her husband grieved and wrestled with the situation differently. That became another problem. In fact, they were so at odds with one another, they considered divorce.

Kate and her husband struggled; their foundation was coming apart. Then one day, as Kate tells the story, she just started praying, she was on her knees praying, she didn't know what else to do. And slowly, she came to know God in a different way. She came to see God, as a parent who lost a child. She knew that God was crying with her tears.

As Kate tells the story, through a long process of prayer and supportive friends, her foundation started coming back together. But it was different... Her faith was more about being okay with questions she couldn't answer. She was more empathetic, able to listen and not have to fix everything...

Kate said that being created in God's image, was about letting go, and trusting in the love of God.

Almost every day, I have conversations with people that are experiencing the challenges of growing older. We often say growing older is not for sissies. And indeed, it is not!

The journey of life brings us into many situations that challenge the foundation of who we thought we were. Perhaps a crisis of faith, perhaps a crisis of facing our own mortality, perhaps a mid-life crisis, or a crisis of relationship, whatever that is, we find ourselves dying to our old self-image. And resurrection happens! New life emerges...

Miraculously enough, through time and reflection, we often emerge into a new and different kind of self-image. It's as if, we stop protecting and projecting our Caesar image, and are more likely to be projecting God's image through us-- to be God's coins in the world. Do you see the difference?

And the good news this morning, is that this is God's work. God is doing this in our lives; perhaps gradually, perhaps abruptly. Every time I encounter a loving, kind, and gracious person, I know that God is creating something new, out of something old.

It's nothing that we do; in fact, we can't do it on our own, it's impossible. It's all about God loving us and bringing death and resurrection into our lives.

So, let's render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and then, let's render unto God what belongs to God, because frankly, that's what God does... Just look around you, we are a congregation of loving, kind and gracious people, and when we do that, we are being God's image in the world. Amen...