

God's Icons

Did you ever take a close look at a \$1 bill? George Washington is on the front of course, and on the reverse are the two sides of the Great Seal of the United States. This "Great Seal" dates to the earliest years of our nation. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams began working on it in 1776. The final design was approved in 1782.

One side of the seal bears patriotic symbols: the eagle with outstretched wings, in its talons an olive branch symbolizing peace on one side and 13 arrows symbolizing war on the other. There are several other reminders of the 13 colonies—stars and stripes—and the eagle clasps in its beak a banner proclaiming "E pluribus unum," "Out of many, one."

But the other side of the seal includes religious symbolism. Franklin and Jefferson wanted an image of the Egyptian pharaoh on a chariot riding through the Red Sea in pursuit of the Israelites, with the motto, "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God." That didn't make the final cut, but another Egyptian symbol, an unfinished pyramid did, to symbolize strength and endurance. And above the pyramid is an all-seeing eye, with rays that emanate in all directions. The Latin phrase "Annuit Coeptis" interprets the eye. It means, "Providence has favored our undertakings."

(<https://www.philadelphiafed.org/education/teachers/publications/symbols-on-american-money/>) Providence, the protective care of God, the many ways God looks out for us, was a unifying religious belief at the time our nation was founded.

And in the 1950s, another phrase was added to our currency: In God We Trust.

I took this close look at a dollar bill to see what sort of clarity it might give us as we seek to "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." My conclusion? It's not as clear as it was in first century Palestine. Our symbols are comingled.

But the coin which Jesus held up as a symbol clearly came from someone other than Israel's God. Not only was the emperor's image on it, but this was what it said: "Tiberius Caesar, August and divine son of Augustus, high priest." (see Richard Spalding's essay, pp. 188-192, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol 4, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, for this and other ideas referred to below) That claim to the emperor's divinity was religiously offensive to the Jews, whose teachings abhorred idolatry. The coin was just as offensive to their political life, for the tax it paid provided the funds for their military occupation and oppression.

Clearly the question was a setup designed to trap Jesus. If he said, "Don't pay the tax," he could be arrested by the Romans for sedition. If he said, "Do pay the tax," he would scandalize the religious leaders who were his best protection against such an arrest. In these days of polarized politics, we all can recognize a no-win question. I can see the reporters gathered around, their microphones poised to capture the big story of the day.

Many a sermon has been preached on this text examining the relationship between church and state and our responsibilities when these allegiances compete. Many others have been preached to remind church goers of their financial stewardship responsibilities. But today I'm seeing another dimension to this story. Jesus is showing us what he meant when he said, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely, for your reward is great in

heaven.” That’s what was happening to him, and it would also happen to his followers. And he is illustrating for us what he meant when he said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” For the reward of giving to God the things that are God’s is the recognition that it’s not our stuff, it’s not our money, it’s not our worldly possessions that matter most to God. It’s us. We belong to God. And when we give ourselves purely and wholeheartedly, not only do we see God, but God is seen in us.

The Greek word for “image” is “icon.” In Christian tradition, an icon is an image which, when venerated, opens up a window of proximity to the divine. These days, we are more likely to think of an icon as one of those little pictures on our computer screens or phones, the gateway to a program or app. It’s the same concept. The icon on a screen invites opening up a window. The image, or icon, of the emperor on a coin invited veneration of the emperor. By turning the political question into a theological question, Jesus asks without even saying the words, *What is it that bears God’s image? Where is the icon of God?*

And because his opponents are steeped in the Hebrew scriptures, they know the answer. The image of God is in humanity, in each person, for Genesis tells us we are made in the image of God. We are God’s icons.

We may need some polishing up to become transparent entryways to God’s presence, but we nonetheless have been given that awesome role and responsibility. We are God’s icons just as much as the coins of the realm were the emperor’s icons. And as the Heidelberg Catechism, written in the 16th century, teaches us, our only comfort in life and death is that we belong not to ourselves, but to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He is the ultimate Icon of God, whose image lives in us, too.

So our faithful response is to give ourselves back to God, freely and in grateful love and devotion. What could that look like in this year of years, when every day it seems we wake to more bad news about the pandemic, more distasteful stories about our national politics, more grim revelations of racial inequities, and more stories of human suffering than we thought we could ever handle? What does it mean to live as God’s icons in this troubled world?

One way to start is to consider how we use our time. For some, the limitations of the pandemic have meant lots of empty time to fill. Others are feeling so many more demands on their time than they ever expected. Few would say that their hours are spent the same way they were 8 months ago. It’s one of the ironies of this season that both extremes cause stress. So for all of us, this strange season raises the question of time for God. All time is God’s, so dedicating an hour to worship is giving to God something that already belongs to God. I don’t think there’s anyone who truly prefers this technology-enabled version of worship, which tells me that those who are here this morning by whatever means it took to be together are sincerely devoted to spending time with God. I hope and pray that this hour is stress-reducing for you, that it fills your soul with God’s Spirit, and that the Spirit then infuses your days, whether you are experiencing boredom or overwork. Because when we are less frantic, when we are more centered, when all our days reveal dedication to God’s purposes, we show God to the needy world. We dusty icons are polished by time devoted to God.

A second outcome of understanding ourselves as icons of God is revealed in how we treat one another. This is the radical claim of scripture: that EVERYONE contains a spark of divinity, EVERYONE bears the image of God, EVERYONE is worthy of love and respect because God made EVERYONE. That is a revolutionary idea in today’s environment, which is so filled with name-calling and derision. It is a bold concept to assert when some lives are being judged expendable. EVERY life is valuable, so it is right to spend extra resources to protect those who are most vulnerable. We make sacrifices, both as

individuals and as a community, to protect those lives. I am troubled by the idea that lives become less valuable when a person is old or sick, poor or marginalized. We are Christians, so we are not afraid of death, for we know that we are forever in God's care. Yet because we are Christians, we guard the precious, beloved children of God who are elderly, who have health conditions which make them particularly vulnerable to disease, and who have special needs which require more care. And in these "least of these," I promise you, we meet Christ, the "capital I" Icon of God.

For as lower case icons of God, we are agents of God's providence, that all-seeing eye which reminds us of God's care. Christ is in us, and our hands and hearts are his, to heal and give hope, to right what is wrong, to show love to this beloved, troubled world. God protects us and provides for us through the community of caring and love and justice we create and work to sustain. In God we trust--for daily bread, for health, for shelter, for well-being—for God works through human community. To God we give our lives, for to God we belong.

That is the foundational belief of our faith, upon which our story rests. So our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Brief Statement of Faith, adopted in 1991, begins by echoing the Heidelberg Catechism, saying, "In life and in death, we belong to God." And it ends with words to inspire confidence to make it through these and all our days, no matter how challenging. "With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Caesar is nothing next to God. To God be the glory, in the church universal, and in every one of us made in God's image, now and forever. Amen.