

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

*“Children of God: Trapped”*

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**Genesis 32:1-12**

*Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him; and when Jacob saw them he said, ‘This is God’s camp!’ So he called that place Mahanaim.*

*Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, instructing them, ‘Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, “I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favour in your sight.” ’*

*The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, ‘We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.’ Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, thinking, ‘If Esau comes to one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape.’*

*And Jacob said, ‘O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, “Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good”, I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, “I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.” ’*

**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. Then 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.*

They ripped paintings off the walls, dashed statues on the ground, and demolished reliquaries. They smashed stained glass windows and threw rocks at the altar. In three days, they destroyed all the images within four hundred churches while their throats were filled with hymns and Psalms. It was 1566, and the Beggars’ Rebellion in the Lowlands of Holland collided with the Calvinist preachers’ denouncement of idolatry in the church.

This was the violent birth of Reformed architecture, the plain white columns and unadorned chancel reflecting a theology opposed to the creation and veneration of images of God. Calvin devoted three chapters of his theological writings to denouncing icons, asserting that “images are not suited to represent God’s mysteries.”

I was recently accused of being a good Calvinist, and I do love the simplicity and the familiarity of Reformed architecture.

But last fall, I took a pilgrimage to Greece and found a new appreciation for the icons Calvin detested.

Orthodox Christianity has a theological history of iconography that extends back, they claim, to the very first Christian churches. Icons are meant not to be objects of worship in and of themselves, but to draw us into the worship of that which they represent. Icons served as visual story tellers for the illiterate, but also as a way for anyone to encounter God through representations of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ. Rather than draw God down into the earth, they are meant to be “windows to the kingdom,” drawing us deeper into the mystery of God.

In Greece, I saw hundreds of icons as I toured churches and monasteries all over the country. Icons of Christ, Mary, John the Baptist, saints and martyrs adorned sanctuaries, chapels, and the shelves of gift shops. And while the Calvinist in me objected, I quickly began to grieve for what our tradition had lost. Gazing upon the icon of the Holy Trinity, I was drawn into the mystery of the interrelated Godhead. I experienced theological truth and emotional satisfaction in the image of the ascendant Christ that adorns the dome of each sanctuary. I began to wonder what was wrong with Calvin that he couldn’t see the value of sacred art.

I felt no need to bow to or kiss the icons as the Orthodox believers did. Nor did I feel compelled to destroy them as false idols. I began to feel that I was trapped somewhere between two traditions that has somehow failed to have meaningful conversation about this issue over the course of history.

First century Judaism had its own controversies regarding sacred art. Some kinds of art were found objectionable while other sorts seemed acceptable. But the image at the center of today’s story is not at first recognized as sacred in any way and is therefore not controversial for its iconic quality.

Let me begin by setting up this encounter a bit: Jesus has entered Jerusalem triumphantly and has proceeded to heap insult and injury on the religious leadership. He turns over tables in the temple and tells parables that criticize the Jewish authorities. And now they’ve had enough. The Pharisees, you might remember, are keen to uphold the letter of the law in order to maintain their Jewish identity within the context of Roman occupation. And they team up with some unlikely collaborators – the Herodians. The Herodians were, as you might guess, devotees of Herod, the ruler set up over the Jews by the Roman authorities, making the Herodians much more willing to assimilate into Roman culture. They were keen to maintain positive relations with Rome and thereby keep their power and authority. What these two strange bedfellows have in common is a desire to keep the peace. An uprising of Jewish zealots would endanger the lives of all Jews. Any interruption in the fragile peace of the region would be dangerous. And from what they’ve heard and seen of Jesus, he could potentially be a rather major interruption.

And so they come together to trap Jesus in his own words.

The question is simple: as a wise teacher who follows God and who doesn't take sides, do you think it is lawful to pay taxes or not?

What is at stake in this question has nothing to do with taxes. Instead, it is the other certainty they are concerned with: death. You see, on the one hand, paying taxes, meaning tribute, to a man who claims to be the son of god – as the Emperor does - could be seen as an infraction of the second commandment, a sin punishable by death. And while the Jewish leaders don't have the authority to enact this punishment, if they can get Jesus to advocate breaking this commandment, they can discredit and disgrace him. On the other hand, to refuse to pay taxes would amount to sedition, a crime also punishable by death. In fact, it is one of the accusations used against Jesus before Pilate.

The question that is really being asked here is an impossible one, and the Pharisees and Herodians know it. Will Jesus side with the idolatrous Romans or be a seditious Jew? It's a lose-lose. It's a brilliant scheme.

But they underestimate just how good a rabbi Jesus really is. When he looks at that coin used to pay the tax, he does not see a choice between idolatry and sedition. Jesus sees a man, made in the image of God, as it says in the first chapter of Genesis, made a little lower than the angels, as it says in the 8<sup>th</sup> Psalm. He sees a coin worth one day's wage and remembers the commandment to keep the Sabbath, to give one day of every week to God.

Jesus is not trapped. Because he knows something that the Pharisees and Herodians have clearly forgotten.

Jacob, for all his faults, is well aware of the truth that is about to shock the Pharisees and Herodians. In our story today, he is trapped between his father-in-law, Laban, from whom he has just narrowly escaped, and his brother Esau, from whom he stole their father's blessing. Jacob can't go back to a life of servitude under Laban, but he's terrified of what his brother will do to him when he sees him.

In this tight spot, Jacob does two important things: he acknowledges God's sovereignty, and he pays his taxes.

He prays to God, recognizing that all that he has is a gift from God and that he is not worthy of the favor he has received. Everything is from God and belongs to God and gives glory to God. And he knows that he is following God's will in returning to his homeland. But he also knows that Esau is not going to be happy to see him, and rightly so. And so Jacob pays tribute to Esau, he sends him hundreds of animals from his flock. He doesn't worry about whether the percentage is too high or too low. He isn't concerned about whether or not Esau is going to use his animals in a manner he agrees with. He remembers that they aren't his in the first place. They are God's.

And when Jacob and Esau finally meet, do you know what Jacob says? He says, "to see your face is to see the face of God."

That is what Jesus sees. A world that is created by God and belongs to God. The image, the icon, of a man made in God's image. The question about taxes is beside the point. If what you see on this coin is the image of a man-made god, then you have to decide between idolatry and sedition. But if what you see on this coin is a man made in God's image, then give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.

Like an Orthodox icon, Jesus uses the coin to open a window into the mystery and truth of God's kingdom.

While I mourn the loss of sacred art and am ashamed of the Protestant iconoclasts, I agree that we must vigilantly oppose idolatry. But I don't fear images on painted wood or sculpted in marble. I'm not concerned about stained glass or ornamented sanctuaries.

But when I see photo shopped celebrities or self-aggrandizing selfies, I have to ask, "who do I see here? Is it a human-made god or a God-made human?" I get trapped between idolatry and cultural sedition all the time.

But the freedom offered to us in Jesus Christ is the assurance that the world is being re-made, that humanity has been redeemed, and that we will one day see God face to face. And until then, we can see the face of God everywhere, but only if we are looking through the lens of God's sovereignty.

We are surrounded by idols and icons. Many times, they are the same thing. We can idolize people, or, like Jacob, in their faces we can see the face of God. We can idolize our money, or, like Jesus, use it as an opportunity to remember that everything belongs to God.

And so, I invite us to smash the idols and embrace the icons. Get rid of our hang-ups about what belongs to whom. Remember that everything belongs to God. Use every image, every icon, as an opportunity to see the face God. To whom be all glory forever and ever. Amen.