

October 22, 2023  
“The Things That Are God’s”  
Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22  
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Since the summer, we have been on a journey together to discover what it means to go through life as followers of Christ. We began by thinking of how we prepare for a long journey. Then over the last several weeks, we have explored what it means to be followers of Christ for the long haul—it isn’t an easy journey, and we make lots of mistakes along the way. When we follow Christ, we get closer and closer to the kingdom of God- to living the life that God wants for us. Today, we end our series by examining how we can adjust our vision as we remember whose we are and who we are called to become.

All my life, I have had terrible vision. I started wearing glasses in 2nd grade, and I have passed this trait down to both of my children. They both started wearing glasses when they were three, because we knew to have them checked earlier. My youngest son, Daniel, though, had some additional trouble seeing. He had what's called amblyopia. Some of you may have known it as lazy eye.

So, when he was three, his eye doctor recommended that we begin doing vision therapy. So, for a time, we would patch his “good” eye, and he would do vision exercises to help strengthen his other eye. He would visit a vision therapist at least once a week for different activities. One required him to follow the lights along a board, touching them as he went. The whole point of these exercises was to help his eyes

work better together so that he could see more clearly and keep his brain from discarding the signals from 1 of his eyes. Eventually, he graduated from doing the therapy, and I'm happy to say that his vision today is better than expected. He needed this therapy to train his eyes to see correctly.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is helping us to orient our vision to what is most important. He's training us to see more clearly as God sees.

In our gospel, Jesus is continuing His trip toward Jerusalem, toward the end of His life. The authorities are trying to trap Him because they don't like the following that Jesus has. So, they make a "gotcha" question. We've seen these appear more recently in our political landscape. They are questions that have no good answer.

So, here are the religious elite, you can almost see them rubbing their hands together thinking – "We've got Him now! There's no way that He can wiggle out of this one—either the people will hate Him or the government will." So, they send in the B team, they don't even do it themselves, but they ask Jesus, "is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

Jesus asks for "the coin used for the tax" (implying that He doesn't have one), and they bring Him a denarius. Jesus asks them, "Whose head is this and whose title?" and they say that they are Caesar', so Jesus tells them to "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God that which is God's".

The next logical question here is "what belongs to God?" What are we to give to God? So, if the coin belongs to Caesar because it bears the image and name of Caesar, what belongs to God must bear the image and likeness of God? What has God written His name on and created in His image or likeness?

Us... Jesus is talking about us— now for the sake of the Finance committee out there, Jesus wasn't saying that we don't need to give God part of our finances- but the coins used in the temple were different from the denarius, and they didn't bear any image on them. Everything important and of God's kingdom belongs to God.

So, back to the question of what bears God's image? Genesis tells us that from the beginning, God said let us make people in our own image. We bear the image of God. "There were hundreds of laws and stipulations determining what was sacred – fit for use in the service of God— and what was mundane – of this earth and therefore not sacred and not fit for use in God's service. But Jesus wants us to take a different look. Everything is sacred and fit for use in the service of God. Everything, starting with us and everyone around us, belongs to God, and therefore, it is a part of our calling to surrender ourselves to God."

How many of you have seen one of the "Toy Story" movies? Buzz (a Space Ranger) and Woody (A Sheriff from the Old West) and the gang are all toys who belong to a boy named Andy. For those who have seen the movie, how does Andy show who his favorite toy is?

He marks it with his name. When the astronaut toy, Buzz Lightyear, is dejected at learning that he's not a real spaceman but only a toy, he's a lost cause until he learns that he has the name "Andy" written on his foot, too. This knowledge empowers Buzz to put his depression behind him, then get up and do what needs to be done.

Friends, we have a name written on our hearts. The name is "Jesus." If we learn to trust that name, to rely on it, to allow it to propel us into a living relationship with the One who is Lord of all, we will find our lives immeasurably fuller and richer (<https://www.homileticsonline.com/members/installment/93041273>)

Things are important, to be sure. But Jesus seemed much more interested in people than in things. The things that are God's had to refer to everyone that he saw around Him. The ones who were hanging on His every word, the ones who had given up livelihoods and family to follow Him everywhere He went, and also the ones who were setting a trap for Him, hoping that He would get tongue-tied talking about God and get Himself in trouble with the people or the authorities or empire. They, too, Jesus would claim. They belong to God. And maybe if we could treat one another as though they belonged to God, then we might come closer to living out the promise of the kingdom that He kept talking about.

Too often, we treat ourselves and one another according to what we see in the mirror— We see our scars and imperfections, our fears and our failures, our brokenness. We see the things that divide us—politics, race, color, ethnicity, sexuality, economics. The names that we call ourselves and one another are often not holy in any way. Yet, God calls all of us God's own. God calls us to look past the surface to see the divine image that marks each one as God's own beloved. "the kiss of light in the eyes, the watery sign of a cross made once upon a time on the forehead, the image of all those children in the arms of their mothers, and the little ember of resolve to remember them." (Richard E. Spalding, in D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor, ed., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A, Vol. 4* (Westminster John Knox, 2011), 188-192.) All of us carry the name of Jesus.

Santa Cruz, California, in the 1970s, was a very different sort of place. What made it different was a group of people who lived there in great numbers.

They were hippies — or, you might say, has-been hippies. The Summer of Love had long since faded into a psychedelic sunset. San Francisco's infamous Haight-Ashbury neighborhood had gentrified. The "flower children" who'd once inhabited its "crash pads" now held down regular jobs. Many of these has-been hippies had moved out to Santa Cruz, where the rents were cheaper.

This population of former flower children had a certain impact when their children hit the public schools. One of the things the teachers found difficult was the names of the kindergarten students.

Those classes had their share of Michaels and Lisas and Margarets, but there was also Sunbeam, Time Warp and Meadow. One teacher thought she'd seen about everything when it came to names, until the first day of school came round, and she met a boy named Fruit Stand.

The teacher felt sorry for little Fruit Stand, having to go through life with a name like that, but she decided there was nothing else to do but make the best of it. All through that first day of school it was: "Fruit Stand, can you bring me the chalk?" and "Fruit Stand, are you ready for your nap?" But this little boy seemed oddly distant. He participated in all the classroom activities, but he didn't seem very happy.

Finally, at the end of the day, it was time for the children to go to their buses. "Fruit Stand, do you know the name of your bus stop?" the teacher asked.

No answer. That wasn't so strange, the teacher thought, because the boy hadn't said much all day. One of those shy kids.

But no matter. The teacher had a trick up her sleeve. All the parents had been told ahead of time to write the names of their children's bus stops on the reverse side of their name tags. The teacher simply turned over the boy's tag. And there, neatly printed in block letters, was the word "Anthony."

Names are important. They're the labels we bear through life, the invitations we offer up to other people so they may know us better. Should somebody forget our name, or somehow misuse it, we feel hurt, even abused. That's probably how little Anthony felt, after spending his entire first day of school as Fruit

Stand. Like Anthony's teacher, we need to train our eyes to see the world differently, to flip the tag if you will. (<https://www.homileticsonline.com/members/installment/93041273>)

We need to train our eyes to see God's mark in each one of us. To see how we all carry a bit of the image of God in us and are called to be conduits of God's presence in our community, sharing God's glory and goodness.

Even Moses had to flip the script a few times. He had to keep redirecting his vision, and sometimes God's vision. When we look at our Old Testament Scripture for today, we encounter Moses in the tent with God, reminding God (and himself) that the Israelites were God's people and that they needed God to walk among them. You might recall that this is after God has freed the Israelites from bondage in Egypt and the Israelites have whined their way through the wilderness. They have forgotten who they are and whose they are. They have built a Golden idol and angered God. Yet, Moses keeps going to bat for them.

If we back up a verse to verse 11, we learn that Moses often went to the tent and spoke with God as someone talks to a friend.

I picture this as being a little bit like an old married couple talking/arguing. Moses saying, "Come on now, God, remember what You promised me—You have sent me out to save these people, You've told me that I've found favor in Your sight, but You seem so far away... How do I know what I'm supposed to do?" God saying, "OK, OK, I'll do what you want, but only because you are Mine." Moses says, "Show me Your glory." Let me see You. Come and walk with me so that I know that I'm doing the right thing, going the right way. Help me with these people, that You call Yours—they're *Your* nation."

In short, thousands of years before the time, he was asking for Jesus. He wanted God to put on flesh and come and hang out with him. Come and guide him. Come and sustain him—for the task he was feeling way too inadequate to do. To lead the people that he was sure didn't want to be led by the likes of him. He wanted a glimpse of how it was supposed to be, how he was supposed to be in God. He wanted Jesus.

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/the-end-in-sight/twenty-first-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/twenty-first-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-preaching-notes>

Sound familiar? Do you ever feel way too inadequate? Lost? Unsure? If not, there is a whole world out there who knows what that feels like- what it feels like to be lost, alone, to be called every name in the book, except beloved. In those moments when we feel dejected, like Buzz when he discovered he was just "a toy", remind us, O God, of whose we are, and let the things that are God be God's.

Remind us that we, each one of us, inside this building and out. Republicans and democrats, old and young, Palestinian and Israeli. Ukrainian, Russian, American. All of us are yours.

Moses' cry to God is what ours is when we try to offer God ourselves, our hearts, our lives. We cry out, "give me Jesus. Give me Jesus. Give me a glimpse of how I'm supposed to walk. Give me a hint of how I'm to do this task You've given me to do when I know it is beyond my ability to do. Parenting, pastoring, teaching, leading, living in love with neighbor and family, none of it is within my capabilities to do. None of it." <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/the-end-in-sight/twenty-first-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/twenty-first-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-preaching-notes>

Help me to see Your people as Yours, and to give it all to You. Guide me to do what I have no idea how to do. Let me see your image on those who are so different from me- Let me see Your light in their eyes, Your cross on their foreheads, Your love in their hearts.

Come, Lord Jesus, pass among us and show Your mercy. Let us see the scars on Your hand- the mark of humanity on You. Cover us that we may follow You.

Notice that God tells Moses that he will only see God's back, not God's face. If we are looking at God's back, where are we? We are following—something we can't do when trying to look God in the face.

So, let us be the “things” that are God's. Let us open our eyes to where God's goodness is walking among us. Let us bear God's image into the world. May God's name be written on our hearts that God might use us, speak through us, be seen in us. For, we are the community that wants to be the conduit for God to be in touch with a hurried and hurting world. We want to be the sign – by how we live together and how we reach out – that God invites all to come and know and be known. We want to train our vision to see God in one another, even in the most surprising of people and places.

Take a minute to turn to someone around you and tell them, “Thank you for being God's presence in the world”. We'll give you a minute to do that and then Parry/Praise Team will begin to play our closing hymn and we invite you to join us....

Matthew 22:15-22

22:15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.

22:16 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.

22:17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

22:18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?

22:19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius.

22:20 Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?"

22:21 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."

22:22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.