

15Then 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.

They went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said.

They knew where they stood with him. Their kind words and their question were like a little ball of cheese on the mousetrap, once Jesus answered either Rome or the people would crush Jesus.

"Teacher, we know that you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us then, 'Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?'"

The Roman Emperor, Tiberius, claimed to be the Son of God, on some of the coins it proclaimed, "Tiberius, Son of the Divine Augustus."

This was not a debate about church and state. Some of the first Christians were put to death for refusing to bow down to the emperor who claimed to be divine. They would only bow down to Jesus.

But on that day Jesus was not interested in teaching what is right and what is wrong – Jesus was being clever. He could have taken a stand against Rome and been arrested as a subversive. Or he could have supported those who cooperated with Rome and the people would have turned against him. Either way Jesus would have been like so many others who think that the really big questions in life are political or religious. But Jesus did not nibble at their trap. Instead he set one of his own.

He asked for a coin. They showed him a denarius. He asked, "Whose image and inscription are on this coin?"

"The emperor's" they responded.

“Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

The coin has the image of the emperor. His *ikon* for that is the Greek word for image. *Ikon*.

In the first book of the Bible it says that God created humans in God’s image – in the Greek translations of the Old Testament the same word – *ikon*.

Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s

The coin – the emperor’s image. And you? Whose image do you bear? Whose image in your working and spending and voting and playing and worshipping and thinking and learning? Whose image?

The image on the coin is just on the surface. What is stamped on the surface does not change what is on the inside.

Is God’s image like that on you? Just on the surface? Or has the image of God – the image of God’s Son been absorbed into you the way a sponge absorbs water- filling every part of your being?

“Give to the emperor’s the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

My church.

For the past 37 years I have tried not to say those words. When I am with another pastor or speaking to someone who does not belong to Christ Lutheran I have referred to you as “the congregation that I serve” or “the church that I serve.” but not “my church.”

Now that may sound strange to you but here is the reason – this congregation is not my possession – not mine to do with as I please. I did not come here to shape you and mold you according to my tastes. I did not want to make you all into my image. I have been called to serve this church but it is not my church. This was not Pastor Grabel’s church nor Pastor Kettner’s church nor Pastor Stein’s church nor Pastor Woyen’s church nor will it be the possession of anyone who comes after me. You are the church of Jesus Christ – a people shaped and molded in Christ’s image. You are the body of Christ, Jesus’ hands and feet and eyes and ears and arms and mouth in Avon Lake and Avon and North Ridgeville and Sheffield Lake and Sheffield village and Bay Village and Westlake. You are Jesus’ love and

forgiveness and power and purpose and life and mercy in the places where you learn and work and eat and play. There is no simple formula for how you will do and be the love of God in Jesus Christ but the very breath of God, the Holy Spirit has filled you and guides you and empowers you. You never have been, never will be my church but you are the church of Jesus Christ – you belong to him. Here you gather to be shaped and molded by him, to be filled with him.

It has been a privilege for me to proclaim the word of God to you and to preside at Holy Communion as you gather. I am grateful for all the ways that you have allowed me to be your pastor. I am grateful for all that you have taught me about Christ's power to make all things new. I am grateful for what you have taught me about faith through your example.

As Paul wrote to the Philippians I now say to you: "I am confident that God who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ..... And this is my prayer that your love may overflow more and more so that in the day of Jesus Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

Amen.