21st Sunday after Pentecost

Matt. 22:15-22

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 10-18-26

These beautiful autumn days always remind me of an October afternoon years ago when four of my pastor friends and I met for a little rest and relaxation. The day was clear and cool, the sky bright blue, and in an effort to rejuvenate our weary hearts and minds, we decided to use our creative energies to make paper. We gathered all the ingredients necessary, including the petals of the last cosmos, some milkweed seeds, and pieces of birch bark which we decided to add for color and texture.

There we were, outside, in Harrison, Maine mixing water and cotton and cardboard and paper scraps and flower blossoms in the golden light of a bright October sun, when all of a sudden one of us said, "Listen!" We stopped short and looked up at the place from where the sound came, and there above us was a flock of Canadian geese headed south.

It was one of those moments when all the beauty of the created order seemed to come together, asking nothing of us except silence and awe… But one of us, the pastor who had been an accountant before becoming a pastor, quickly broke the silence by exclaiming, "Hey! How many geese do you think there are? Let's count them!"

Ever since then we've called this pastor "the Count," teasing him for asking such a question at such a time… not because it was a bad question, but because it was a diminished question in light of what we were witnessing… In a sense it was a question of mastery in the midst of mystery, a question of calculation in the midst of possible transformation… a question of no consequence in comparison to the gift at hand…

Rather like the pastor who, when her husband was finally able to get her out on his sailboat on a beautiful summer afternoon when the wind was blowing, would ask, "How long do we have to go out for?"

Or like that same carpenter husband who, when walking through any given forest or woodland, would regularly stop, look at a magnificent walnut or pine tree and exclaim, "Wow! How many board feet do you think are in there?"

All of these questions being diminished in comparison to the gift at hand…

Which is exactly what Jesus was trying to say in our Gospel text for this morning about the question related to taxes posed to him by the Pharisees and the Herodians…

Now the truth is, the question was a set-up, intended to get Jesus to say something that would justify action on the part of the authorities who wanted to arrest him for his dangerous teachings and his popular appeal among the people.

Jesus was actually questioned that day by two unlikely allies; the Pharisees being devout Jews who lived by the letter of the Law, and the

Herodians being Jews who aligned themselves with the Roman governor Herod Antipas, doing Herod's bidding when it came to keeping order in the empire. These guys didn't usually spend much time together, but on this one particular day, they decided to pose a question to Jesus that would be impossible for him to answer in a way that didn't get him into trouble with one group or the other…

"Teacher," they asked, "Tell us, what do you think… Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

If Jesus answered "no" to the question, he would be branded a political insurgent in the eyes of the Herodians; if he answered "yes," he would be considered a collaborator with the Roman government by the Pharisees and most others in the Jewish community who suffered under the heavy hand of the Empire…

So there Jesus was, faced with yet another question intended to trap him, not unlike a host of other questions posed to him by the religious and political leaders of the day. Clearly Jesus was aware of what these guys were up to when they asked the question about taxes, which at its heart had nothing to do with taxes, and everything to do with Jesus' regard for Rome and the emperor.

Of course he could have responded to the question with the same political acumen as our politicians do today, opting to ignore the question and to change the subject; or to answer it in a way that somehow tells both sides what they want to hear…

Or Jesus could have stayed within the linguistic parameters of his questioners, continuing the conversation with sound bites having to do with "who to?" and "how much?" and "which one?" But instead, Jesus did what he always did in every conversation and every situation… **He**

recast the moment in a way that offered a glimpse of something like paper-making on an October afternoon, or a summertime sail on Penobscot Bay, or a walk in the silence of an old-growth forest…

And he did so by using a coin. Jesus always used ordinary things to reveal the mysteries about which he spoke. Things like seeds, lost sheep, yeast, vineyards… In this case, he used a coin, asking his interrogators to bring him a denarius, the instrument of currency commonly used in the day. On the coin there was an image of the emperor's head, along with the title, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus."

Jesus asked them, "Whose head is this? And whose title?" They responded, "The emperor's."

"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's then," said Jesus… "And to God the things that are God's."

Do you see what Jesus is doing here? He's not changing the subject, or saying the question about taxes is bad… He's just saying that it's a diminished question; a question of calculation and obligation when the possibility of transformation and resurrection is at hand…

Saying in essence, "Why should the question of the day or the focus of your lives be about the image of the emperor on the coin, when the image of God has been imprinted on your heart?"

I love what Pastor Bruce Evenson says about this Gospel text. He says, "With a coin, Jesus appears to foil his enemies on both sides. Taxes are for Caesar, but those imprinted with God's image are for

God…" While the religious leaders ask a question about political obligation, **Jesus is revealing to us who we are…**

"The true meaning of your identity," he says, "The true measure of your value has to do with the likeness borne on your bodies and souls. As Caesar has cast the denarius in his image, God has cast each of you in God's own image. As Caesar sends out wages and calls back taxes, God also sends out the bearers of God's likeness to be the golden coinage in the kingdom of God…"

"In other words," Jesus is saying, **"the imprint of Caesar on the coin holds no candle to the imprint of God on your hearts…** So why are you counting geese and asking questions of 'how much?' and 'who to?' when the kingdom of God is at hand and imprinted on your very bodies?"

In true Jesus fashion, his response to the question posed to him about taxes wasn't the clear-cut, black or white response the Herodians and the Pharisees were hoping for… As our text says, after their encounter with Jesus, they "left him and were amazed"… "Perplexed," would be more like it I think… "irritated, frustrated, flummoxed," leaving them with more questions than the one they brought to Jesus in the first place…

And leaving us with questions too, I think… Not only in a literal sense, as many of us may very well be wondering in this moment in time if paying taxes to our government is congruent with our Christian values… a question worth talking about for those who may want to do so…

But in a deeper sense, this Gospel text is inviting us to imagine, to feel, to know the imprint of God's image on our hearts… on our lives… and to let that image shape our identities, our decisions, our way of being in the world…

Leaving us with the question then of how to go about this when the world is trying as hard as it can to imprint totally different images on our lives… images that lead to fear and division and apathy and cynicism and hatred…

As I have contemplated this question this week, acknowledging the world's strong imprint on my own life, I've found some help in a poem by Tess Gallagher and in one very small Greek word…

The poem is called "The Hug," and it begins by telling a story about a woman who is standing on a sidewalk in a neighborhood somewhere with her arms around a friend… As they are doing so, a man walks up to them and asks if he can have "one of those"…

"He looks homeless," the poet writes, *"because of how he needs…"* And then she continues…

So I walk over to him and put my

Arms around him and try to

Hug him like I mean it. He's got an overcoat on

So thick I can't feel him past it. I'm starting the hug

And thinking, "how big a hug is this supposed to be?

How long shall I hold this hug?"...

I put my head into his chest and snuggle

In. I lean into him. I lean my blood and my wishes

Into him. He stands for it. This is his

And he's starting to give it back so well I know he's getting it. This hug. So truly, so tenderly

We stop having arms and I don't know if

The friend I was with walked away or what…

Clearly, a little permission is a dangerous thing.

But when you hug somebody you want it

To be a masterpiece of connection, the way the button on his coat will leave the imprint of

A planet in my cheek

When I walk away. When I try to find some place

To go back to…

I lean into him… I lean my blood and my wishes into him… When you hug somebody you want it to be a masterpiece of connection… the way the button on his coat will leave the ***imprint*** *of a planet in my cheek when I walk away…*

… And that one small Greek word I mentioned is the word "eis"… e-i-s… which is normally translated as "in," but which can also be translated as "into"… As in, "For God so loved the world that he gave his

only son, so that everyone who believes *into* him may not perish but have everlasting life…" So that everyone believes *into* him might have fullness of life"… Do you sense motion in this word "*into"* instead of something fixed in stone?

Do you sense some hope, if on this Sunday morning in late October you don't feel yourself or believe yourself to be imprinted very deeply with the image of God on your heart and face and soul? Do you sense that there is still the possibility for such a thing to happen if you just lean a bit toward… a bit *into* the one who leans towards you in bread and wine, in the word of mercy, in the love and care of others, in the beauty of an October day, in the bright half-moon of night?

It's what Jesus longs for, for all of us… even for the Pharisees and the Herodians, who came that day with yet one more diminished question, not unlike, "So, how many geese are there?" or "How long do we have to be out on Penobscot Bay?" It's what Jesus always longs for us as he invites us all to lean *into* something evermore life-giving than Caesar, or mastery or counting geese as they fly overhead in an October sky…

Jesus invites us to lean **into** him (even when believing **in** him is hard), so the imprint of love will be on our cheeks and hearts when we try to walk back into the world, when we try to find some place to go back to…

The thing is, our Gospel lesson for this morning is not suggesting that the question of taxation is unimportant… Jesus was born in Bethlehem because, like everybody else at the time, Mary and Joseph

had to go from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be registered for the purpose of taxation for the maintenance of the Roman Empire.

From the beginning of the Gospel narrative we see that Jesus' mission was to be lived out in the midst of economic injustice, empire building and war mongering. From the beginning we see Jesus' mission was to bear the image of God's kingdom to a world that chooses diminishment over resurrection with great regularity…

As Christ ones, as Christians, we are called to follow Jesus… To go into this world, and to bear the image of Christ for the sake of love**… And for the living out of this life, the starting question, the central question is not "How many geese are there?" or "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Ceasar?" but "Whose am I?" "Who am I?"**

This is the question from which the rest of our life flows. And the answer Jesus gives is an invitation into mystery… An invitation *into* relationship with the creator, liberator, lover God… An invitation to lean ourselves into the One who offers a masterpiece of connection with us, and to see what happens… The One who with his very body seals us with the Holy Spirit and marks us with the cross of Christ forever. +

This is the image we bear on our hearts and souls and faces… This image that allows us even in the darkest of days to be a masterpiece of connection for others in the name and in the way of Jesus… The very image I see imprinted on you, each and every one of you now… All of you, golden coinage in the kingdom of God…

Let us affirm the imprint of God's image on our hearts and on our lives as we sing together… You will find the words to our hymn in the back of your bulletin…

On my heart imprint your image
Lord of love and God of grace,
so that in my words and actions
others see you face to face.

On my life imprint your image,
make my living ever true,
take my heart and hands and spirit
so that I might love like you.

On my will imprint your image,
make me ever only thine
through my loving and my living
may your grace and mercy shine.

High we reach in great thanksgiving,
deep we reach to meet each day,
wide we stretch to meet our neighbor,
help us Lord to find the way.