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Matthew 22:15-22

Isaiah 45:1-7

Psalms 96:1-13

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

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The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

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“Mirror, Mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?” You may recognize this line as the one spoken by the Evil Queen in Disney’s classic Snow White film. Each morning, we are told, she begins her day by consulting her magic mirror and asking the same question: “Who is the fairest of them all?” There is of course a correct answer, at least, for the Queen. She is seeking validation – validation of her worth, of her value, of her power. For the Queen, worth, value and power are tied to her image – they are dependent on being the fairest, the most beautiful in the land, and when she finds that she is not the fairest her identity is rattled, her sense of security is rocked. She resorts to treachery to secure her status and value. Does this sound familiar?

You might be thinking why yes! That sounds just like Caesar putting his head on coins and raising statues in his own honor. Or perhaps this sounds just like the Pharisees, who feel undermined by the power and popularity of this exciting, young Rabbi named Jesus, who seems to be stealing their spotlight. And we will talk about that more in just a moment. But I also want to begin our reflection this morning by considering that each of us have magic mirrors that we consult every morning. For many of us that mirror is called a cell phone – or perhaps a tablet or laptop - and we check it compulsively just like the Queen, asking how many likes did my social media post get? Or does that other “friend” on Facebook look happier, wealthier, healthier than me? For others the mirror might be the scale in the bathroom where we check our weight or the bank account where we check our balance.

While health and security and connection are all important things in and of themselves – very often they are not what motivate our daily check-ins. Instead, our “checking” rituals, just like the Queen’s, are engaged to gauge our worth – a worth that we measure by some external yardstick: an ideal of beauty, a fantasy of wealth, a dream of public recognition. And when we feel inadequate – that we are not the fairest - we engage in behaviors that are destructive, even if to no one else but ourselves. We do this because our worth is tied to the wrong image.

In today’s gospel we find the Pharisees setting a trap for Jesus. The Pharisees, belong to a class of religious leaders who teach in local synagogues and influence the religious life of the community, and they are often not a fan of Jesus - the street preacher who steps outside the bounds of the Jewish Law that they represent. The Pharisees are worried about their image and want to secure their worth by eliminating the competition – they even apply flattery to Jesus, appealing to what they hope is his sense of image and pride by saying “we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth.” But as we see in Jesus’s response to their question, Jesus knows something different about image – something the Pharisees seem to have forgotten in their race for recognition and respect. Jesus knows what image worth is truly tied to.

When the pharisees ask if it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor and Jesus asks to see the coin, the denarius, on which the emperor's head is stamped. He asks "who's head is this and whose title?" When the Pharisees reply that the coin bears the image of the Emperor, Jesus gives his answer: *Give what bears the image of the emperor to the emperor and give that which bears the image of God to God.* The Greek word we translate here as "head" is the word that also means "image" or "likeness" calling us back to Genesis where God makes human-kind in God's own image. So, if we bear the image of God, that means we are meant to give ourselves back to our maker. Jesus does not go on to say exactly what of ourselves we are to give back or how, but if we understand the image that we bear, that might provide some instruction.

A favorite idea of mine comes from the Anglican Priest and Poet, Rev. Malcolm Guite, who teaches that we are all little *logoi* or little divine ideas. We are the thoughts of the creator who is speaking our lives into being – continually thinking us into and through our existence. We are the maker's dreams, and we are God's vocabulary in the great text of creation. And so, we bear God's thoughts, God's words, God's dreams. We know this, says Rev. Guite, by the virtue of our very speaking and thinking.

"I cannot think unless I have been thought" he writes, "Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken. I cannot teach except as I am taught / Or break the bread except as I am broken."

And so, we give back to God our thoughts and words, our dreams, our actions, and our brokenness - That they may be the means of Grace. That they may have value without need of comparison. That they might be used for God's continued speaking so that we may become as St. Francis of Assisi prayed, "Instruments of God's peace." Or, at least, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge once wrote: we "try not to become an impediment in the speech of God."

And so how are we to know if we are an instrument or an impediment? Here we might turn to Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. The church that Paul addresses is praised for being "imitators" of Paul and the Lord – as imitators they are copying the image. "The word of the Lord has sounded forth from you," says Paul, so much so that "there is no need to speak about it!" he says. No need to speak because the fruits of their love precede them, no need to check because their value is felt by all as a benefit. No need to check because their peace surpasses all understanding. When thoughts are turned away from idols, from those worldly images we idealize, and the unreachable perfections we strain and twist ourselves to achieve - and instead we look to God - we finally wipe the fog away from the mirror and see our image, our value, and our love clearly. What a relief it is. And while it may not always be spoken about, we can trust from Paul's observation that it will be felt by and matter to those around us as well.

So, if only we had a magic mirror that would tell us of the God-image we bear and speak to us daily of its value and our inherent worth? The thing is we do. First, we have scripture that reminds us that we are made, fearfully, wonderfully, and lovingly by God who knows the number of all the hairs on our heads, and yes, God knows even every wrinkle, every roll, every smile, every scowl – so then every reflective surface speaks to the divine image, every detail is a divine detail. That makes every bathroom mirror, every shop window, every photograph even every puddle, a magical reminder of the divine and of the gift of being made.

But, on a deeper level, when we are attuned to seeing the divine image in all of God's people, then every place we put our gaze becomes a mirror as well, particularly our relationships and encounters with others - when divine image and divine image meet and greet one another. To that end, the Priest and Theologian Henri Nouwen offers us daily check-in questions to ask of our various mirrors. Instead of asking "Who is the fairest of them all" he suggests that we ask:

"Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone's face? Did I say words of healing? Did I let go of my anger and resentment? Did I forgive? Did I love?"

"These are the real questions," he says. And I offer them to you for your daily check-in with the magic mirror that is your life. May you re-discover that enchantment in all the world as you walk through it. May you come know the divine image within you. And when, as happens from time to time, you forget, may we all help mirror that truth back to each other.

Amen.