

A-24, 10/22/17, Matthew 22:15-22, Genesis 1:26-31, Westminster Presbyterian  
Whose Image and Likeness?

1. Children. Have you learned the Lord's Prayer? How does it start? *Our Father, who art in Heaven*. Why do we call God Father? So if God is my father and your father, that means we are brothers and sisters, right? I want you to know that we are a family, a church family. So we care about you. Being a kid is hard sometimes, but we're your family and we're here to help you and pray for you.
2. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is in Jerusalem, the big capital city. This incident occurs during Holy Week, so he already made a name for himself when he entered the temple courtyard, turned over the tables and disrupted their business. So the authorities are hostile toward Jesus, but they have to act friendly because he is so popular among the people. So they dream up a question that is designed as a kind of a trap. Let's listen for God's word.
3. So what is the trap? Here's their question: *Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?* They mean, according to God's law, the law of Moses that is in the first five books of the Bible.
4. So here's the trap. On the one hand, taxes to Caesar support the Roman system of oppression. People in the land of Israel were a conquered people and two thirds of the wealth of the land went to the Roman overlords, leaving very little for the common people. It was an oppressive system. Some called for a revolution. They

definitely would not be in favor of paying taxes to Caesar.

5. But, on the other hand, not paying taxes was against the law. The Herodians would be happy to arrest Jesus for sedition if he said *no, according the law of Moses, it is not legal to pay the Roman tax*.
6. So either yes or no will get him in trouble. So what does Jesus do? He asks for the coin used to pay the tax. Someone has one, probably similar to the one on the cover of the bulletin. Here's the head of Caesar and what does the inscription say? TIBERIUS CAESAR, SON OF THE DIVINE AUGUSTUS. You can probably make out the Latin words DIVI and AUGUSTUS. The other words are abbreviations, and some are worn off. So this is a graven image to a false god, the so-called divine Augustus Caesar. Romans worshiped their emperors.
7. So instead of answering yes or no and falling into their trap, Jesus comes up with this enigmatic answer: *Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's*.
8. What's that supposed to mean? People interpret it in all different ways. At first glance, *give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's* sounds like we should pay our taxes. But then comes the second part—*give to God the things that are God's*. That makes it more confusing.
9. Reading it literally, well, there was a separate tax for the temple. Maybe he meant that they should pay both the tax to Rome and the tax to the temple.
10. Or maybe not. This is God's world. Everything belongs to God. The empire has no valid claim over any of it.

Give to God, the things that are God's means we shouldn't be supporting Caesar's ambition of world domination.

11. So you could take this statement any way you want. It's enigmatic and that's just the point. It's a game. They try to trap Jesus in his words. And he finds a way out. He did not answer their question directly because he knew a direct answer either way would get him in trouble.
12. OK, so where are we? Since trying to figure out the literal meaning of his words is not getting us very far, let's try a different tact.
13. When Jesus asks, *what is the head on the coin*, the Greek word is actually *eikon* or image. It's the same Greek word found in Genesis 1:26. *Let us make humanity in our image*.
14. And Tertullian, the church father, said we should render *"the image of Caesar, which is on the coin, to Caesar, and the image of God, which is on man, to God; so as to render to Caesar indeed money, to God yourself*.
15. So there is the image on the coin, and the image on us.
16. The poetic telling of creation in Genesis 1 imagines God deciding to create humanity in God's image. And in case you thought God was an old man with a beard, Genesis does not agree with that picture, because both male and female were created in God's image. God has no gender.
17. But for us, that means that we bear the imprint of God. We bear God's likeness, just like that coin bears Caesar's likeness. Although the biblical writers describe a fallen humanity in which the likeness of God is obscured, there is still an essential goodness, a family likeness. God is

our father. Christ is our brother. Brothers and sisters all are we. We bear the family likeness.

18. Let's go one step further. Jesus has a special name for those who are trying to trap him. He calls them hypocrites. Hypocrite literally means someone who is playing a part. They are putting on a disguise. Outwardly, they are flattering him but that's just a mask. They are not sincere. One might even say that they are hiding their God likeness.
19. Now we're getting somewhere. What does it all mean for us? I'll tell you a story.
20. Annette and I like to travel. A few years ago, we decided to go to Poland to look for Annette's ancestors. Her grandparents both came from a small town in Poland, but they had been dead for a long time, so nobody knew the name of the town and the family had lost contact with any relatives over there. So I did some research and found the ship manifest for both grandparents and found the name of the town. So in 2012 we went there along with two of her cousins. And in a little town in southeast Poland, we found Adam Łuczyński, a grandson of their grandmother's brother – a second cousin. It was a remarkable time of discovery and connection.
21. I took pictures of the four cousins all lined up together. The family resemblance was striking. They bore the Łuczyński family likeness. They were created with the same likeness. It's a revelation to know who you are and where you came from.
22. Do you see where I'm going with this? It's important to know who we are and whose we are. If we are made in

God's image, we will be like him—nurturing, loving, redeeming. If we were made in the image and likeness of God, then we are to act like God. Not like the false god Caesar, the one on the coin who lords his authority over others for self-gain. No. We are to act like God: creator, sustainer, nurturer, and lover of our souls.

23. The God of Genesis created us in his image and put us in a position of dominion over creation. Not exploiting creation, but being good stewards over it. In other words, we are called to be God's partners, co-creators and co-workers.

24. Sometimes, we lose track of our heritage. Like the Herodian hypocrites, we pretend to be something we aren't. We bear the family likeness, but we have amnesia. We forget who we are and whose we are. As the ancient philosopher said *know thyself*.

25. And so, in my church history class we cover 2000 years of history, from Jesus all the way to the present. We try to do a reasonable job of surveying the highlights. As we go along, I'm hoping that it will become personal, that the students will begin to see where they fit into the story; that they will find their roots and see where their personal faith history intersects with the wider story of the Holy Spirit's work in the world.

26. We are children of God and followers of the living Christ. We bear the image of God, whether we know it or not. We tend to forget this remarkable family connection.

27. Indeed, claiming our identity as children of God is the task of a lifetime and beyond. Our quest is to discover

and then become who we are, children of God, made in God's image.

28. Here's the way the apostle Paul puts it. *For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

Prayer of intercession: Creator God,  
you call us to love and serve you  
with body, mind, and spirit  
through loving your creation  
and our sisters and brothers.  
Open our hearts in compassion  
and receive these petitions  
on behalf of the needs of the church and the world.

*Prayers of the People, concluding with:*

Holy One,  
hear our prayers and make us faithful stewards  
of the fragile bounty of this earth  
so that we may be entrusted with the riches of heaven.  
Amen.

## Westminstergram

A few years ago, Annette, two of her cousins, and I traveled to Poland to look for their ancestors. In a little town in southeast Poland, we found Adam Łuczyński, a second cousin and grandson of their grandmother's brother. Towards the end of our meeting I took pictures of the four cousins all lined up together. The family resemblance was striking. It was obvious they were all from the same family. It was a remarkable time of discovery and connection.

We were created in God's image. We bear God's likeness. We have this remarkable family connection that remains unknown and forgotten by so many. Come join us this Sunday as we rediscover our rootedness.

