



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## Insider Language

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 19, 2014  
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 22:15-22*

One of the things we try not to do at St. Bart's is to use a lot of "insider language," believing that part of the radical welcome we attempt to practice means that we avoid speaking in codes, that we communicate in language and action that are accessible to everyone. There is some evidence that we may not be as successful as we like to think we are. For example:

- ❖ We wear arcane vestments (outfits)—quite grand ones even as we pay homage to a Savior who wore a simple tunic and sandals, if he wore any shoes at all;
- ❖ Our processions are led by a man or woman in a solemn black robe, carrying a little stick known as a verge; originally these "vergers" were dispatched to beat back wild animals and deranged people; the animals we bring to church now are largely (and preferably) domesticated, and every last one of us is at least a bit deranged;
- ❖ We bow and cross ourselves at odd moments, and some of us would kneel if we could without becoming crippled for life;
- ❖ We enter the church through the "narthex," sit in the "nave," and walk through the "chancel" on the way to receive communion, which we understand as the Body and Blood of Christ; and
- ❖ Our lay leaders are known as the vestry and are led by Wardens.

Hmm. Maybe everything about us is not exactly as clear as a bell.

Church talk about money is the most coded conversation of all. We rarely usually use the "m" word, opting for, or I should say co-opting, the word "stewardship," by which we mean almost exclusively money, pledging, giving, or tithing—using the last in the list, tithing, only if we are truly and hopelessly into magical thinking. Stewardship in the literal sense has nothing to do with money; it simply means the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care. In the church world when speaking about stewardship we throw in a little talk about giving of our time and talents, code talk for volunteering ourselves and our skills to advance the mission of the church. But everyone knows that when we use the word "stewardship," we are talking about money.

I am going on about stewardship this morning because many parishes throughout the Episcopal Church are observing what is called "Stewardship Sunday." The end of the year is coming. In parishes like ours we are worrying about closing a huge budget cap before December 31<sup>st</sup>; we spend all year in faithful hope that a huge portion of our budgeted income will arrive in the last quarter. In other more traditional churches this is the Sunday when pledge cards for 2015 are due. In both cases a lesson, landing upon a gospel like the one we have just heard read, is viewed as a gift from God on a day like this—because everyone knows that Jesus' words, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's," are the take-home points of the original stewardship sermon preached by Jesus himself.

Of course, you know that I am being facetious. Jesus never said a word about giving to the church and wouldn't have had a clue what the Wardens were talking about had they suggested that he do so! He only talked about money at all as it related to taking care of the poor. But he had a great deal to say about our character of life, about the way we are called to live in the world and the kind of values we are to embody.

The setting for the story is obviously highly polemical and charged. Matthew places this exchange with the Pharisees during the last week of Jesus' life, the week we know as Passion Week. We miss the point of the story if what we feel primarily is that Jesus really got the upper hand this time, that he bested the Pharisees, sending them away amazed. This wasn't a game, intellectual or otherwise, for Jesus; it was literally about life and death—not so much about his

losing his life but his showing us how to live ours. When we look a little closer at what Jesus said, his remark feels less like a brilliant retort in an argument than a huge and deeply significant theological claim about who we are.

The prop used in the story, the denarius, was itself a symbol of what was terribly wrong in Palestine at the time. Though the currency was as essential as any mode of trade ever is, the people of Israel despised it, for it represented the power and presence of the Roman occupiers, whom they hated. Using it at all represented for many pious Jews a sense of complicity or the appearance of it, and it filled them with shame. The Pharisees knew all this and were deliberate in their putting before Jesus an almost impossible dilemma. Was it lawful to pay taxes was a question loaded beyond what we can truly understand. Indeed it was unlawful **not** to pay taxes—and very dangerous.

Jesus redirected the conversation in a way that our translation does not adequately reflect. When they handed him the coin, the denarius, he asked, “Whose head is this?” Our translators chose to translate the Greek word *eikon* as head; arguably a better translation is “image.” “Whose image is this?” Jesus asked, “Whose image is on this coin?” Jesus rightly acknowledged that what was owed to that image had to be paid. But his use of the word *eikon*, or image, evoked a much more deeply significant resonance among his detractors than we might imagine. Deeply versed in the Torah, these Pharisees immediately made the connection to one of the opening verses in sacred scripture. From the first chapter of Genesis, we read, “And God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.’”

Immediately the Pharisees were amazed not because they were confused but because they so completely understood what Jesus was saying. Jesus said, Yes, of course pay what is owed to the one whose image is on the coin. This is the world in which we live, Jesus acknowledged, the material world. In this world we pay the Emperor that which is owed to him. But to God, Jesus said, because we bear God’s image, we owe ourselves—all that we are, all that we have, all that we can ever hope to be. Because we are stamped with God’s image, marked indelibly, created in the image of God, our deepest and most profound allegiance is always to God.

Like the Pharisees, perhaps for different reasons and perhaps for the same, I stumble away from this short passage with more amazement than clarity. Just the notion that we are not only made in the image of God but also marked with divine imprimatur is stunning; and if we will allow it to, it will absolutely reorder our lives. We belong to God; to *really know* that, even for a fleeting second, is life-changing and redirecting. Marked with the divine image sets us in the world—all of us human beings—in a particular way. We live material lives, but we know that our **real** lives find their center in that which is not material.

Last night I returned from a 48-hour visit with my sweet mother. It was late; I was grumpy and tired. Of course the flight was packed. And naturally as I walked down the aisle, I could see my seat before I got to it: a small sliver of seat wedged between a big man—that’d be with a capital “B”—and a young mother with a child in her arms. With resignation I plopped down, planning to be miserable the entire flight. No one seemed to know how important I was. And then this little girl sitting in her mom’s lap started checking me out; and when I actually began to be aware of her, I could see that she was sick, really sick. As her mom and I began to talk, I learned that they were returning from St. Jude’s Hospital, where her precious little child had been receiving treatments. I had just been thinking about the image of God and particularly about how cleverly I would talk about it today; and all of a sudden I realized that the image of God was sitting right next to me and that her name was Polly.

And for reasons that I can’t fully explain, in that moment I knew what Jesus meant when he said, “Give to God the things that are God’s.” We give all we have. We give ourselves, we give our sick children and our healthy children, we give our wildest hopes and biggest disappointments, we give what we have cobbled together and called life, and, yes, of course we give our money, because it is part of who we are—we give it all to God because we belong to God.

That doesn’t clear anything up or make everything easy about money, about how much we give or don’t give; but in the most fundamental way I can imagine it tells us all we really need to know: we belong to God. And as long as we know that, we will figure the rest out; and it will be okay.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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