

Elizabeth L. Windsor, D.Min
July 8, 2018
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Samuel 8: 1-9
Proverbs 29
Romans 13: 1-10
Mark 12: 13-17

“Whose Image Do We Bear?”

On this Sunday following the 4th of July, I confess that Independence Day makes me uncomfortable. John Adams wrote to his wife, Abigail, on the signing of the Declaration of Independence: *“I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more.”* From its inception, God and patriotism have been tied together in our nation. The belief that God’s special blessing on this land sets us apart from other nations and privileges us over them was not unique to our Founders; we hear it still today.

Adams’ vision of Independence Day celebrations brings into sharp relief the struggle I have with our national holiday: Who are we on the 4th July? Are we Christians? Are we Americans? Are we Christian Americans? American Christians? To whom – or to what- do we owe allegiance? Must God’s *image* be wrapped in the flag?

Our ancestors in faith have wrestled with these very same questions for far longer than our nation has existed. In today’s passage from 1st Samuel, the people of Israel are called to be subjects of the one God – set apart from other nations by their allegiance to God alone. God reigns and therefore, no human King is set over them. They are led by Judges and Prophets who speak and act at divine direction. They are called to be a nation formed by the law given at Sinai in order to reflect God’s *image*.

There is no leader to follow the prophet Samuel. The people beg for King – a King like the ones other nations have. It is too hard and too frightening to bear God’s *image* without a leader. God has been very clear that a human king is a form of idolatry. Yet hearts set on being like other nations, our ancestors demand that Samuel go to God and make clear their desire. God grants their request -warning no good will come of this, for Kings are often capricious and driven by power in their own interest.

The reading from Proverbs describes the contrariness of human rulers: *When the wicked rule, the people groan. If the ruler listens to falsehood, all his officials will be wicked. When the wicked are in authority, transgression increases.* There will be good Kings who *judge the poor with equity*, who know

that *by justice, stability is given, and who know the rights of the poor*. But human authority is risky at best. Not all rulers conform to the *image* of God and even those who try do not have the vision to rule with justice and equity. Human rulers will lead their people to perish. And that is what happens. Israel is invaded more than once, sent into exile, returned home eventually and then finally, occupied by the Romans.

This is the experience of God's people upon which Jesus stands as the Pharisees and Herodians attempt to trick him into blasphemy or sedition by asking: *is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor?* If Jesus answers, *it is lawful* to pay the tax, the Pharisees –and the poor in the crowd for whom the tax is especially burdensome - have him for choosing the emperor over God, but if he answers, *it is not lawful*, then the Herodians – a group of Jews who support Herod – will claim Jesus has denied the emperor's sovereignty. Their question is framed in "either/or" terms – sacred or secular? Choosing one over the other will doom Jesus.

But Jesus refuses their question, asks to see the coin and turns the question back on his interrogators; "Whose *image* is this?" The choice of the word "*image*" is not random. Like Jesus, the Pharisees and the Herodians knew the power of the word for "in the beginning, human beings are created in the *image* of God. Those present know purpose of the "law and the prophets" is to re-form the people into the *image* of God distorted by the choices made in the Garden of Eden and beyond. Jesus' clever answer: *Give to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God what is God's* does not respond to the "either /or" of sacred or secular. Rather, he implies a more difficult question for those to whom he is speaking – and to us, "Whose *image* do you bear?"

Whose *image* do we bear? Whose *image* do our fellow citizens bear? Whose *image* do those who are not citizens bear? At this particular time in the life of our nation, these are critical questions about both Christian and American identity. Scripture has taken center stage in our national drama. In recent weeks, the passage we heard this morning from Romans has been the weapon of choice: *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God*.

As you might suspect, these few verses have a long history of use as a foundational text supporting "law and order." Martin Luther applied them in support of putting down a Peasants' Rebellion in Europe in 1524. English clergy – including John Wesley –preached them against the violence of the American Revolution. These verses were argued to oppose abolitionists and in favor of the *Fugitive Slave Act*. Two weeks ago, the Attorney General of the United States cited these verses in a speech defending the administration's immigration policy.

Ripped out of context, it would seem the “*image*” of God Christians are called to in these few verses is to be found in obedience over service, strict adherence to laws that exploit many and empower but a few, secular citizenship over sacred bonds, This *image* has no relationship to the *image* of God Jesus invokes over the Roman coin or the law and the prophets given to our ancestors. So just what is Paul up to in this passage?

A Jew and a citizen of the Roman Empire, Paul knows the law and prophets, and he knows the power and privilege of Roman citizenship. But Paul rejects these *images* of identity in favor of the *image* of Christ. Over and over again in his letters, Paul constantly reminds those who follow Jesus that they have *put on Christ*. Through baptism, the *image* they - and we - bear is that of Jesus. And that makes this section of Romans all the more challenging.

The verses immediately before and after chapter 13:1-7 give us a bit more insight. Chapter 12 of Romans concludes with Paul describing what living as *images* of Jesus require: *Bless those who persecute you and do not curse them . . . Live in harmony with one another. . . do not repay anyone evil for evil. . . as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. . . never avenge yourselves . . . if your enemies are hungry feed them, if they are thirsty, give them something to drink . . . do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*” This is the *image* of Jesus his followers bear.

Rather abruptly, Paul transitions to: *Let every person be subject to the authorities; for there is no authority except from God . . . Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.*” I imagine that the Roman Christians found this as perplexing as we do.

In verses 8-10, Paul exhorts: *Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.* Well, that makes whatever *image* Paul intends to convey in these passages about as clear as mud.

In Greek, “owe” and “due” are the same word. Perhaps Paul means that paying what is owed to the authorities frees those who bear the *image* Jesus to *owe no one anything, except to love one another* as expressed in the commandments. For Paul, bearing the *image* of God fulfilled in the person of Jesus is summarized as: *Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.*

Paul reverts to the “law” of our ancestors revealed in the *image* of Jesus. This law is very different from the emperor’s, for it finds its perfection in loving the *image* of God in the other; feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, living peaceably with one another. And if further

clarity is necessary to know whose *image* disciples of Jesus are supposed to bear, Paul ends Chapter 13 with the command to: *Put on the Lord, Jesus Christ*. Paul knew – as we do – that Jesus challenged and disobeyed the religious and secular authorities of his day. He healed on the Sabbath. He ate with outcasts. He touched lepers and bleeding women. He fed the hungry crowd and made the tax collector welcome. He did not participate in the patriotism of his day by worshiping the emperor. He did not advocate overthrowing the state and he renounced violence. Jesus lived as if it both religious and secular authority had no power over him. He was crucified for both blasphemy and sedition at the hands of the state on behalf of religious authority.

In “*putting on Jesus Christ*,” Paul claims this *image* of Jesus as Christian identity for all time. If obedience to the civil authority is the point of Romans 13:1-7, then Paul himself does not obey it.

So what does all of this mean for us – we who bear the *image* Jesus in a country founded in the words of *America the Beautiful* – as a “patriots’ dream?” The United States is not the Roman Empire. Our foundational documents insist on the consent of the governed; not the whims of an emperor. We find “liberty in law.” And while there are those who would use the secular law to enforce their religious laws, no one set of religious belief or practice is intended to be enacted as secular law.

It is both easier and more difficult to live as *images* Jesus in a representative democracy. Our citizenship gives us the right to participate in the governance of our nation, but bearing Jesus’ *image* requires that we “accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.” This is the vow made at our baptism. These are times when resisting evil, injustice and oppression requires that we write letters to our representatives, step into the voting booth or take to the streets. These are times when our baptismal vow demands we non-violently defend the poor, the marginalized, the sick, the stranger and those who bear the *image* of God wearing skin colors or genders or nationalities or religious faith different from our own.

Our country is struggling with its own *image*. “Patriotism” -or the perceived lack thereof – is fiercely debated as athletes kneel in protest, the police are called to interfere with those “living while black,” and children are torn from their parents at our border.

While the 1812 Overture and fireworks boomed in the back ground as I waded through commentaries on Romans this week, a colleague sent me a tweet: “*Sometimes to be a good Christian was to be a bad Roman. So before you accuse someone of being unpatriotic, ask yourself what empire they are serving.*”

As individuals and as a community of faith, today's scriptures challenge us to answer the question Jesus asks: *Whose image* do we bear? The reign of God requires our response. **Amen.**

The Gospel according to Mark

Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it." And they brought one. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They

answered, “The emperor’s.” Jesus said to them, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And they were utterly amazed at him.

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.