October 19, 2014 Year A

All Saints’ Church Proper 24

Isaiah 45:1-7 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Psalm 96:1-9 Matthew 22:15-22

Let us begin in the name of God, who creates, redeems, and sustains us.

When I turned my iPhone back on, the first message line I read was, “Call Me!” from Bishop Rob.

It was after 9:00 pm, I had just landed at Logan coming in from a wedding in Germany, and I was waiting for my luggage.”

“Oh my, could this be it?”

I said a prayer for awareness, just to rid myself of the distractions of traveling, and then I opened up my email:

“Dear Jamie, I am delighted to share some exciting news for you from All Saints’, Peterborough, and I hope you can call me as soon as you can.” Yours in Christ, Bishop Rob.

“Oh my, by the grace of God, my life is about to change.”

And then I burst into tears, full of delight and beauty, as I realized, standing next to the whirling revolving belt, I had been called to be Rector of All Saints’ Church.

What a gift!

Such a blessing to be your priest, to be called Rector, to be entrusted with your lives, to be in the midst of birth and death, baptisms, marriages, transitions, and all of our joys, sorrows and hopes. I am blessed to be the custodian of your stories, within community, within the Holy Spirit, within love, as we dream and build together all the ways we can bring heaven to earth through All Saints’ life.

You have honored me.

And with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you.

Vow making is precious, full of honor and dignity.

And this is why Jesus is in such hot water in our gospel reading this morning.

Jesus is about honor and dignity for All. And the authorities want to crush Jesus’ spirit. The religious leaders come to Jesus with sickening, sweet praise:

“Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.”

Let’s be clear: this lack of partiality is driving the leaders crazy.

It’s not that Jesus heals people which poses such a threat. It’s that he forgives…. over and over again, always.

Forgiveness- the morality beyond morality, or as Reinhold Niebuhr succinctly summarizes, “Forgiveness is at once the fulfillment of every concept of justice, and its annulment.”

In other words, forgiveness is about Mercy, Grace, God Abiding with us….. This is God’s vow to us. Jesus lives and breathes forgiveness because God is like that. The love of God is an impartial goodness, beyond good and evil.

Deep down, the religious authorities know this, as forgiveness is echoed throughout their scriptures. But they have buried that gift, covered it up with their own self-importance, arrogance, power plays, and with cultural categories that they have sustained: the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, the deserving and the disinherited. They like defining the haves and the have nots. They have become the brokers of life and death, weaning themselves away from the very Source of Life Everlasting.

The Providence of God is always impartial, with Concern for All, and no special privilege can be carved and shaped out of it.

So they are out to trick Jesus, and instead set their own trap: “Is it Lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor or not?”

Thinking that Jesus will finally have to pick a side, they wait. No matter, his answer will become a death sentence, either because he could be charged with treason and with betrayal of the nationalists’ efforts to fight against the oppressor, the Emperor.

With all of the leaders’ abundance, they live within scarcity. And Jesus, with so little, lives in abundance, which is why he can trump them.

“Show me a coin. Whose head is this?”

We need to pause here for a moment. The word is image: Whose image does this coin bear?

It’s the same term Paul uses when he talks about the image of God, reminding us always that we are created in divine likeness. Not like a statue, or a picture or a tangible object, but rather in the idea that we are Creatures of the Creator- our very breath dependent on the Sustainer of all Life.

We are there in the opening of our Scripture: Genesis: And we are good…. Very good!

The way Jesus puts the question, “whose image is this and whose title?” begs a second, deeper question: “Whose image do you bear?”

The answer: “I bear God’s image.” And my title: “I am God’s beloved.”

We are God’s coins, God’s currency, God’s treasure, God’s vice-gerent.

Like a key that opens up a locked door, we bear God’s image as a way to Free us, so that we can believe in the audacious hope that we can participate in bringing heaven to earth, the Kingdom of God, here and now.

We can reclaim our value, our dignity, our preciousness, especially from the power brokers who want to ensnare us in their petty, demeaning, ugly messages, filled with hate, bitterness and false claims of Reality.

What is the real Real? We are precious in God’s sight.

Last month, September, I was here on a Saturday for a tour through the rectory, and I stopped in to the Food Pantry and introduced myself to Pat, a woman who was picking up food. When she heard that I was the new Rector, she asked, “You won’t shut this pantry down, will you?”

I thought to myself- she doesn’t know the lay leadership here very well, and said, “I don’t have that much power, but we would never close down this pantry; you are a part of our future, the very fabric of our lives.”

“Oh good, I come three times a week, and without this pantry, I could not feed my grandchild.”

I walked away, not only humbled by life’s fragility, but also by my privilege. When I meet someone new, I have the opportunity to revel in discovery. Yet many in our world must protect, guard, defend, because their vulnerabilities are so easily exposed.

So many of the world’s messages are rooted in scarcity. We at All Saints’ are posed to live out of abundance, in both spirit and resources, and we can give. Out of privilege, we have the opportunity to be responsible to our gifts by being good stewards… to give, to serve, to work and to hope.

One of my friends once told me that he did not like coming to church because people had to pay to be in church. “What are you talking about?” I asked. “Those alms basins go up and down the aisles and people pay to be in church.”

“No, that is not the point. And maybe we need to be better at sharing with others what we are doing. We are not paying our dues; we have been given the opportunity to give thanks for all that we have received.”

When we give our money, freely, we are also given the opportunity to ask the deeper question:

“Whose image do I bear?” I bear God’s breath.

“What is my title?” I have been stamped by God, minted as God’s dream for us, a destiny shaped by being God’s beloved.

When Jesus says, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and give to God what is God’s, see Jesus smiling. Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s. Is there anything that does not belong to God.

Of course not, it’s all under God’s reigning love and we are a part of God’s dream for the world.

What a gift we have!

Amen.

(the Rev.) Jamie L. Hamilton