

“Image of God” based on Isaiah 45:1-6 and Matthew 22:15-22

The Bible often sounds so... Bible-y that it can be easy to tune out. Or, at least, it can be for me. Sometimes when I'm reading I'm tempted to “yadda yadda” the stuff that feels like its been said over and over. This is similar to trying to read legalese and make sense of the actual point, which I know is there somewhere, but I have to break through ALL the words that don't actually mean anything to me.

I mention this because I'm not entirely convinced I'm the only person with this problem, and because I think many a normal person might have had this issue with our Hebrew Bible text today. Yes yes, God opens doors, God levels mountains, God gives riches, God calls us by name, God chooses the chosen, God is the only one. We've heard all this before, it is practically a chorus.

The big difference in this passage, the part that makes it not at all redundant nor boring, comes in the very beginning. “Thus says the LORD to his anointed.” (I KNOW, you are half tempted to zone out the Bible-ese already, but I promise, you want to hear the next two words) “to Cyrus”. This, my friends, is some crazy turn of a phrase.

A quick set of historical reminders is in order to make sense of it though. Around 587 to 586 BCE the Jewish people living in Jerusalem were defeated by the Babylonian army, and the city and temple were destroyed. The leaders and the educated were taken to Babylon as slaves and the rest of the people were left behind without defenses, food, or hope. This is known as “the Exile” and we believe that the Hebrew Bible as we know it was written down during and after the Exile, which means the stories were told in particular ways to try to answer the question “Why did this happen to us?” In fact, the very idea of a Jewish Messiah developed at the time of the Exile, as a person who would right the wrong of the Exile itself and recreate a vibrant Jewish Empire.

The Exile ended when the Persian Empire defeated the Babylonian Empire in battle, and took it over. The Emperor of the Persian Empire then decided that he didn't much care about the Jewish captives, and freed them to go home as they wished. It had, however, been 48 years, which is several generations without birth control, and not everyone went home.

Back to our passage, do you know who was the Emperor of the Persian Empire in 539 and let the captives go free? Cyrus. So, this passage, which is the first one to claim anyone as the Messiah (“God's anointed”), claims that role for a FOREIGN, NON-JEWISH, EMPEROR. Well, now, that's pretty curious, isn't it? This stuff isn't all just Bible-ese. 😊

The idea here is that by freeing God's people, Cyrus was doing God's work. But the claims are rather radical. First of all, Cyrus is called the messiah, then Cyrus is said to be called by name by God, and to be given a last name by God EVEN THOUGH Cyrus doesn't know or worship God. So, the work of freeing the people was done through the work of Cyrus, and God helped Cyrus along the way to make it happen.

The most curious part is that God used an EMPEROR, which doesn't tend to be the way God works, at least when we get to the Gospels. However, the fantastic thing we can take from the Isaiah passage is this: God doesn't limit God's work just to people who believe particular things or speak of God in particular ways; God is willing to work with and through anyone who is open to working with God! The fact that this was clear enough in 539 BCE that the people of God thought Cyrus was God's chosen messiah is very good news indeed. Inclusivity runs deep with God, and God's people have known it for a long time.

Now, Matthew is distinctly less enamored with foreign emperors than Isaiah is. Matthew sets up this story beautifully, designing a narrative around the snappy statement of Jesus which said, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.” That little saying is one of the very few things the Jesus Seminar REALLY thinks Jesus said, and Matthew builds a story around it to make sense of it. The story is well constructed. The coin described has on it the face of the Emperor, while our faith tradition has always claimed that people have on them the “image of God.” Matthew even word plays this, having the adversaries describe Jesus as a man who shows no partiality, which is literally, “you do not regard the face of anyone.”¹ The whole story then plays around with faces, and images, wondering whose matches with whose.

While Matthew's story is well constructed, we think the authentic memory is simply in that statement, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.” That statement seems to direct us to a reasonable follow up question: What is it that belongs to Caesar and what is it that belongs to God? In fact, I think it is this question that makes the statement so powerful and memorable. It appears benign, and would have sounded benign to Roman ears. They might have thought, “Yeah, sure, give

money to the Emperor, that's really what he wants, and as long as he also gets the power and respect he deserves, your God can have what's left.”

Jewish ears would not have heard the same thing at all. They would have heard Jesus and immediately considered, “But, if we are to give to God what is God's, there is nothing left for the emperor!” So, Jesus' saying manages to totally subvert the power of the empire WHILE sounding benign to the emperor's ears. Well played, Jesus.

So, for a faithful Jewish person at the time of Jesus as today, all things belong to God. That's one of the implications of thinking of God as Creator, God created all things and all things are thus God's. The less obvious follow up question is: what does it mean to give something to God who is already the Creator of all things? I don't mean to be trite, I think this is a valid question. We might have a sense of being able to “give our hearts” to God, but we aren't just looking for that. We certainly have the capacity to give money to the church, and to other groups whose work builds the kin-dom of God, which can be a way to give to God, but if God is the God of EVERYTHING and we are to give what is God's to God, then... how?

Jesus doesn't clarify. As the Jesus seminar puts it, he leaves that as homework, “He does not tell his questioners what to do other than to decide the claims of God in relation to the claims of the emperor.”² As far as I can figure it out, to give something to God is to use it for the building of God's kin-dom; or sometimes that's called God's kingdom; that is, to create the world into the world as God would have it be; that is, a world where everyone has enough to survive AND thrive; that is, a world of justice that allows for peace; that is a reality where all people are humanized and no one is left dehumanized; some call this the beloved community. I know that's a lot of rephrasing, but we Christians find this idea important enough that we talk about it in a lot of ways, and it seems important to point out that they're all the SAME idea.

In seminary I was offered the idea that we are co-creators with God. That is, God created, but in that creation we received free will and that free will is a part of creating what is and what will come next. If the kin-dom is to come, then we need to be co-creators with God in making it happen, because God will not work without us nor force it upon us. I'm proposing that to “give to God” is to offer it for the sake of the kin-dom. Resources I see all us as having include: our time, our energy, our mental though space, our money, our gifts, and our passions. None of us have any of those in equal measure, but we all have the chance to decide what to do with them.

There is a heck of a lot of work to be done in building the kin-dom as well, and the work is quite varied. Paul did some good work on making lists of various gifts that are useful and various work that is to be done, but the end point is that we need lots of different skill sets and we need not judge ourselves nor others for what we're able to offer.

As a practical example, when the area I was in flooded in 2011 I was asked to do some organizing work, because the fire department was busy emptying basements and the fire auxiliary was busy trying to distribute food and water. So I sat at the fire department and made lists: lists of people who wanted to help and lists of people who needed help. To be honest, I'm not all that useful at most building or demolishing work, I don't know all that much about it. However, it turned out that a deeply necessary job was the one that involved keeping lists and making phone calls. It was more than a year before I lifted my hand with anything but a pen or a phone in it for that recovery, and yet I got enough feedback to know that the work I'd done mattered. At the same time, nothing I did would have mattered if there weren't people willing to do the heavy lifting, nor others working to get supplies, nor if the people working to restore the utilities hadn't succeeded, nor if the basements weren't drained, nor if the people hadn't had food and water in the meantime.

I think perhaps disaster recovery is a decent metaphor for building the kin-dom if anything is: it takes a lot of people doing what they are best at, some of which may not seem that important, much of which is mucking out, but all of which together can transform it all!

Another practical example seems to be in order. Many in this congregation have been doing the long term work for full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in the church and in the world. That requires a lot of different effort: from strategy work to protests, from legal work to acts of defiance, from the the "work" of celebration to the simple acts of inclusion, and beyond. A few years ago a friend mentioned the deeply necessary work of having initial conversations with people who are closed minded, or who are having their very first thoughts that perhaps God loves LGBTQIA+ people too - and that she no longer feels called to do it. She is an incredible organizer, we really need her organizing rather than in those conversations, and she was wise enough to know continuing to be in those talks decade after decade was too much for her. Her stance felt like freedom. We don't all have to do the same work, there is too much to do to be stuck on only one thing!

So, to give to God's what is God's, what does it mean? It means our whole lives being directed towards co-creating the fullness of God's vision into the world. The

really good news is that when we are working along with God, the burden is lightened and the possibilities are expanded. Thanks be to God! Amen

1Richard E. Spalding, *Pastoral Perspective on Matthew 22:15-22*, Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 4, edited by David L. Barlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 189.

2Robert W. Funk, Roy W Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Autthentic Words of Jesus* (HarperOneUSA, 1993), 236.

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Rev. Sara E. Baron

First United Methodist Church of Schenectady

603 State St. Schenectady, NY 12305

Pronouns: she/her/hers

<http://fumcschenectady.org/>

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