

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Thanks you for the opportunity to share God’s word on Laity Sunday. First I have to tell you a Laity Sunday story. When our daughter Blair was attending Candler School of Theology at Emory University, she was offered her first pastoral appointment: to be the pastor of a small church in the Georgia mountain foothills, about two hours northwest of Atlanta. Georgia, like Illinois, is a very Methodist state, and there were two other Methodist Churches within five miles of hers. A professional society I have been a member of for many years was holding their annual conference on the north side of Atlanta, so I called Blair and told since my conference ended on Saturday at noon, I could join her at Center Valley United Methodist and be there for her service on Sunday; she had a four-bedroom parsonage, so my showing up was no problem. (I’m sorry, doesn’t that church name sound made up? It’s like someone needed a church for a Hallmark movie and they said, “Oh, lets just call it Center Valley Methodist!”) So anyway, what does Blair come back at me with? “Great! It’s Laity Sunday so you’re preaching!” So the first time I went to my daughter’s first church, I preached. The church was really small but they had a great choir...making up about 80% of the congregation. I was thinking I might be literally “preaching to the choir,” but much to my relief, they sang the anthem before the sermon and then all went and sat in the pews.

Our scripture today is short but challenging. It is wrapped up in history and as many of you know, I was a professor and probably the favorite course I ever taught was a history class, so please bear with me as we talk a little history here. (No quiz, I promise!) Around forty-five years before the birth of Jesus, Julius Caesar was assassinated. Many folks think he was the first Roman Emperor, but he was not. As he took power, Rome was a republic, with a Senate, and an Assembly, and two Consuls as the executive authority. In time of crisis, Rome would bestow the temporary title of Dictator to allow a supreme authority to restore order and the civil government. After a civil war, which he was basically responsible for, Julius Caesar was given the title Dictator for ten years and in 44 BCE, was named Dictator Perpetuo, or Dictator for Life. Shortly thereafter in the same year, as many of us know from Shakespeare, he was assassinated by members of the Roman Senate. More civil war followed, and the winner was Caesar’s great-nephew and adopted heir, Octavian. He became Rome’s first Emperor in about 27 BCE, and was awarded the title of Caesar Augustus. During his reign, the Senate deified, i.e. made into a God, Julius Caesar and when he died in the year 14, Augustus was deified as well. Both joined the pantheon of Roman gods, who were latinized versions of the Greek gods. Augustus’ stepson Tiberius succeeded him as the second Emperor of Rome. So there was a great deal of political upheaval surrounding the birth, life, and ministry of Jesus.

It made the image of Tiberius on the denarius more than just a picture. It represented foreign oppression, the collection of taxes—which was contracted out to subcontractors, seen in scripture as *publicans*—and the subjugation of Kings of nations to Imperial rule. It also represented, in some senses, a deity, because both of the Emperor’s immediate predecessors were made into gods, and his step-father Augustus was worshiped widely in the eastern provinces of the Empire. So there were both religious and political issues wrapped up in this simple coin.

Of course, the question as posed by the Pharisees was supposed to trip up Jesus. “...what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” The assumption was that he would give them a yes or no answer. If he said yes, he would anger the people of Israel who hated Roman rule and the Roman pantheon of gods. If he said no, he could then be reported to Roman authorities for treason. When given the denarius, he asked them whose picture and name was on it, and of course they answered, Caesar’s. Because the coin bore the image and authority of the Emperor, in a sense it belonged to the Emperor. In his answer Jesus acknowledged that secular governments have a legitimate right to collect taxes and provide civic order. Paying taxes doesn’t compromise your faith. Jesus’s statement here does not, as may people claim, constitute an endorsement of government, not does it offer government untrammelled authority. It’s just an *observation*. Those who make these kind of arguments based on this Biblical passage are intentionally twisting the meaning of scripture, because this is not what Jesus meant. Of course, sadly we have seen that many who label themselves as Christians somehow see performative government cruelty as fitting with their faith, because they don’t want to actually hear what Jesus really said, but prefer a version brought to them by those who see cruelty as an answer to what they perceive as sin...rather than grace and God’s salvation, the real answer to real sin. Nowhere in the Bible does it say “If aliens live among you, cast them out, for they will take your jobs.” In fact, in Leviticus God says, “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

But the *image* on the coin is important here, because he went on to say give to God the things that are God’s. What is God’s? US. Just as the coin bore the image of Caesar, we bear the image of God, the *Imago Dei*, because we are created in the image of, and as a likeness of, God. This means **just what we stand for here at Wesley**. Because we are created in the image of God, *every* human being is endowed with inherent dignity, worth, and sacred status regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, gender preference, wealth, status, or ability. The people he created in his image aren’t just *some* people; they are *all people*. Jesus is telling us that God does not want our money (his church might need it but that’s a different sermon), rather God wants us, our lives, in our commitment to be his people. We are called to render unto him what his his, to care for his creation, and treat those created *in his image* with respect, justice, and dignity. In rendering unto God what is God’s, he is talking about human stewardship, which means his people must act as God’s representatives or caretakers to tend and rule over his creation. He is not here physically so we are his hands. The way we live our lives, care for his creation, and care for those he made in his image, is what we render unto God.

So Jesus takes the either/or question asked him, and he gives it a both/and answer. It’s not a dichotomy, it’s not a yes or no answer. His answer is simple on the surface. But the meaning behind it? That’s pretty deep. He pitched his answer to the perfect crowd, because the Pharisees spent their lives trying to ferret out every detail of what was meant by scripture. The depth of his answer was not lost on them. “When they heard this, they were amazed.” They expected a yes or no answer, not an answer worthy of the wisest of rabbis!

Yes it’s a tough passage of scripture. But the point is NOT what is Caesar’s. The point is what is God’s. He loves us, and he wants us to love others just as he loves us. So let’s all try to remember that Jesus is reminding us that just as we are formed in the image of God, we to need remember as we deal with other people day in and day out, that they too are images of God, and treat them as such.

**“Give therefore to Caesar the things that are
Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s”**

A sermon by Ray Trygstad, delivered August 18, 2026
Wesley United Methodist Church, Naperville, Illinois

Let’s close with prayer:

Dear Lord, please remind us daily of who we are and how we came to be, that we are made in your image. Help us also to remember to treat others as images of God as well, and to always accept the freedom and power that God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression, in whatever forms they present themselves. Remind us to always confess Jesus Christ as our Savior, put our whole trust in his grace, and serve him as our Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races. Amen.