What are some of the familiar images in this world? Nike has their “Swoosh.” “F” is used for Facebook. Pin-stripes on uniforms say, “the Yankees.” For us Cardinal and Gold is Iowa State University. Images help us to identify things. Military people wear uniforms. They identify them as troops so that people know to whom they belong. According to international conventions of war, wearing a uniform means that you are to be treated like a prisoner of war and not a spy or partisan who is shot after capture.

Our money has images on them to identify them. We see George Washington on a coin and think “quarter”, Thomas Jefferson and think “nickel”, Abraham Lincoln the “penny”, and FDR the “dime”. Those are famous people in history; they help us to identify the coins. But what tells us to whom the money belongs are the words, “United States of America.”

Roman coins in Jesus’ time had on them the heads of the Caesars. But those heads didn’t just help people identify the coins. They told you to whom the coins belonged. The Caesar, the Roman emperor, was not just a leader; he was a dictator. He called the shots! And over the heads of the Caesars were often the words “Son of a god.” You didn’t just pay taxes to the Roman government. You paid them to Caesar, to a god.

We have many ways of identifying ourselves—Social Security numbers, credit card numbers, ISU number, cell phone numbers, our last names. As children our last name not only identified us with a set of parents, it also told people to whom we belonged. But after 18 years, a last name is just a way to identify us just like our first names. We may have visas to get us into countries, degrees that get us jobs, licenses that allow us to drive on public roads, and uniforms that are needed to do a certain job. They help to identify us, but do they tell us to whom we belong?

Jesus is approached by a group of His enemies who are trying to discredit Him, just like politicians are trying to do to each other before next month’s election. The group that comes to Jesus is remarkable—Herodians and Pharisees. Two weeks ago we heard that Herodians got their power from hanging around Herod. They may have been Jewish, but their customs were Gentile. They had learned to work well with the Romans. The Pharisees, on the other hand, are the “best of the best” Jews. They made it very public that they were not “polluted” by Gentile influence. They got their power not from the Romans, but from the Jewish people who saw them as heroes of their faith. For these two groups to work together would be like Bruce Brailey and Joni Ernst deciding to run jointly, or even better Rand Paul and Nancy Pelosi.

They ask Jesus the trick question, “Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?” It is like the man who is accosted in Des Moines by an assailant who asks, “Are you a Cyclone or a Hawkeye?” The man cleverly thought to reply, “I follow Alabama.” His assailant replied, “And I’m the luckiest Auburn fan in Iowa.” What was Jesus to say? Either He gets in trouble with Romans or with the people who hate the Romans.

Jesus’ answer is first a question. It may seem like Jesus was stalling, but what He asks for exposes His enemies’ evil. He says, “Does anyone have a Roman coin?” Someone comes up with one. Jesus asks, “Whose image is on this?” The answer is “Caesar’s.” Then Jesus says, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

The Roman coin has the face of Caesar on it. In the Roman language of Latin the abbreviation “divis f” was put on it. This stood for “son of a god.” If you were a god’s son, you were claiming to be God. This was offensive to Jews who believed there is only one God, the God whose temple was in Jerusalem. To keep the peace the Romans let the Jews exchange Roman coins for special temple currency when they went into the temple area. This is where Jesus and the people were. Yet, here is such a coin in the temple.

But there is even more. Jesus’ question, “Whose face is on it?” also contrast that of the temple coin. To keep the Jews from thinking they were an independent nation, the temple currency was not identified with the Jews. Instead they were coins that had already been minted earlier in Tyre, Phoenicia (modern day Lebanon). These coins had on them the image of the Tyrian god Baal Maltar,
who in the Greek world was identified as Heracles, better known to us as Hercules.

So Jesus asks, “Whose image is on the coin?” His enemies reply, “Caesar’s.” Jesus then says, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” In other words, “Give to Caesar what belongs to him, but give to God what belongs to Him.” They used Caesar’s coins to buy things. They made use of Roman roads and aqueducts and were protected by the Roman peace. So pay taxes to Caesar. They do belong to him because God has entrusted them with Caesar, just as we are to pay taxes and respect our government.

But where was the image of God? It wasn’t on the temple currency they were using. The coins were not being used such as to avoid having the image of Caesar as a god in the temple, but to make money. When they exchanged the coins, they made a profit in doing it. When the Jews revolted against Roman rule in 66 AD over 30 years later, they replaced these coins with truly Jewish coins.

So what belongs to God? What bears His image?

When God created man He said, “Let us make man in our image.” It was “us” and “our” because the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—were having a conference. Of all creation only humans, you and me, bear the image of God. We, more than anything in creation, belong to Him.

But do we project that image? Do we say we hold to God, or do we only do it to our advantage like those who used the temple coin with a pagan image on it to make money for themselves? Do we trust God so we get to go to heaven at the end or because we believe that we are His?

So often people see all kinds of images coming from us that it is hard to see that we belong to God. Do they identify us as a helpful neighbor or as the one who keeps a perfect house and lawn? Do they see us as a person who holds to his/her principles or simply wants to please everyone? Do they see us as those who work hard to use their talents wisely or just to gain things of this world?

We have lost God’s image because of our sin. We have replaced Him with Caesar or Nike or Audi or Old Navy or Pinterest or Budweiser or Dell or Playboy or whatever we want. What makes it even worse is when we try to hide that under an image like that on the temple coin. We act as if we are “good” people who deserve something for being decent. Martin Luther wrote, “The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.” We are further away from God then, than those who don’t pretend to bear the image of God.

But Jesus bears the image of God. He acted as one who fully belonged to His Father. Yet, He was the one treated as if He didn’t. He did that so we can have all the wrong images erased from us, so we can be forgiven.

Coins were not the only thing with images on them. So were rings. A signet ring worn by an official made an imprint on a wax seal to show that it was official, that it belonged to Caesar or the king or whoever was in charge.

In baptism you and I have been given the image of God. We have been sealed by Jesus. He has made His permanent imprint on us. Luther put it this way, “He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.” Bearing the image of God is not about what we do, but about the one in whom we trust. When we direct things to Jesus, then what comes to the surface is Jesus, His patience, not our kindness, His forgiveness, not our goodness, His acceptance, not our popularity, His love, not our goodness. To whom do we belong? Look at the cross, look at our Baptisms, look at His Supper, look at each other!

Sermon delivered by Pastor Mark T. Heilman
October 19, 2014
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center
Ames, Iowa  50014