Made in Whose Image?

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

St. Columba’s Episcopal Church, Washington, D.C.

Matthew 22:15-22 ~ October 20, 2023

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. Render unto God the things that are God’s. O God, help us always to render unto you that which is yours. Amen.

Vengeance, violence, destruction and death. Lead to tears, to lamentation, grief and desolation. An existential humanitarian crisis escalates with each passing heart-wrenching hour.

So, the authorities came to entrap Jesus, to prove the righteousness of their cause. “Teacher, we know that you are wise; you reveal the way of God; tell us what you think. The missile that struck the Al Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza on Wednesday; whose name was on that missile? Whose name? That of the Israeli Defense Force, that of Hamas, or was it another? Who is responsible? Whom shall we blame? Whom shall we hold to account for the mounting atrocities?”

Jesus replied, “I shall ask you a question.” From the rubble, he invited a little child to step forward, a Christian child from Palestine. Jesus invited a second child to step forward, a Jewish child from Israel. Looking into the face of each child, Jesus turned to the politicians and people and asked, “whose image do you see?”

In the Gospel, the Pharisees and the Herodians sought to entrap Jesus, to force him into choosing sides. Instead, he cut through the chaff, went to the core. Jesus asked for a coin. Looking at it, he asked, “whose head is this? Whose likeness? Whose image does it bear?” Image: the word is important. In Greek, it is the word icon. Icon is the term used in the book of Genesis, in creation, when God says, “let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” “So God created humankind in God’s icon, in the image of God he created them, male and female God created them.”

Whose image is this? Whose image do you bear?” Whose image does she bear? Or does he bear? Whom do you see when you look upon another?

The explosion at the Al Ahli Arab Hospital exemplifies the nightmare of this crisis because every player contends that it is the fault of the other. Each traces that fault back through precipitating events, back through acts of aggression and violence perpetuated one upon another, back through the millennia, all the way to Biblical days of contested rights for those simply seeking a homeland, a safe place in which to live into old age. All the while, God whispers, behold; do you not see my image in the face of one another?

When some thirty of us from St. Columba’s went to the Holy Land just prior to the outbreak of Covid, we did not visit the Al Ahli Hospital, though we visited other hospitals which are also run by the Anglican Church, the Episcopal Church. A few days ago, Anglican Archbishop Hosam Naoum was joined by other heads of the thirteen Christian denominations in the Holy Land, known collectively as the Patriarchs.

Said the Archbishop, “We stand as churches united together in condemning this dreadful and devastating massacre. We regard this as a crime against humanity and we call upon all sides, that this violence and war must end.”

I will leave it to the historians, the diplomats, and those with political authority to parse the causes and propose the solutions. I will name that Hamas’s acts of violence and murder on October 7 were evil, reprehensible. And I will call upon us all as children of God, that above all else – beneath and before all else – our call is to love. Our call is to see in the face of another, the one whom God sees, who is – just like us – made in the icon of God.

I keep returning to Carl Jung’s observation when, in 1954, with the Cold War tension between Russia and the United States at an extreme, a student asked what he thought was the likelihood of a nuclear World War. Jung responded, “I think it depends on how many people can stand the tension of the opposites in themselves. If enough can do so, I think the situation will *just* hold, and we shall be able to creep around innumerable threats and thus avoid the worst catastrophe of all. But if there are not enough and such a war should break out, I am afraid it would inevitably mean the end of our civilization as so many civilizations have ended in the past.”

Jung often spoke of the tension of opposites and the importance for each of us to nurture the capacity to withstand those opposites within ourselves. We love and we hate; we inflict vengeance and offer mercy; we resent and we forgive. At times we can distinguish, separate, and resolve the matter at hand. At other times, we recognize the tension within and must wait, hold the peace, abide the tension until a third way or a new horizon arises.

There is a growing need in this hour for us to nurture our capacity to hold the tension. Everywhere we turn, some issue or another insists that we take sides, that we submit to a narrative framework of opposites – of either/or, of zero sum, of wrong and right. The tension in the Middle East today is magnified, made more potent, by the polarities we experience and create in other arenas.

What does this mean for *us* today? Some of us may be in positions of diplomatic authority; most of us are not. All of us can pay close attention, to notice when the Pharisees and Herodians around us or within us are vying to entrap us in their cause – to notice when we experience a rising sense of the rightness of our cause, or we take offense at another’s words or deeds. At such times, we can seek first to acknowledge the rising tension – not to act, but to abide. Then to ask, if God were here – and of course, dear ones, God is here – how would this appear through God’s eyes?

Perhaps it would be as Rabbi Joshua ben Levi proposed in the 4th century: “A procession of angels passes before each person, and the heralds go before them, saying, “Make way! Make way for the image of God!”

Many years ago, I studied with a wise teacher, Sister Rosemary Dougherty. She proposed that when we pray, we take a deep breath, pause in the silence, to remember, to recognize that God is always and forever at prayer. So that when we pray, we might remember that we are entering into God’s prayer.

It is now late afternoon/early evening in Jerusalem and in Gaza. How might we join in God’s prayer with our Jewish, Muslim, and Christian sisters and brothers?

Let me share as Sister Rosemary taught me to pray. Let us pray:

God of my hope. Let me enter your prayer.

Let us enter your prayer for peace.

How would you have us pray this day, O God, for your people in Palestine, in Israel? For the child in fear, the soldier on duty, the grieving, and the furious, the warmonger and the peacemaker?

How would you have us pray for your people around the world – in Ukraine, in Afghanistan, in Washington DC, in any place torn by strife?

God of our hope, let us enter your prayer for peace. Amen.