

The Rev. Kate Byrd
10/22/2023

Whose Image We Bear

This past week I participated in what all parents of grade school children must endure at one time or another, volunteering at the School Book Fair. Which, I have to tell you, was truly an eye opening experience. From the fluffy unicorn notebooks selling upwards of \$15 a piece, to an entire series following a zombie pig, and shelves covered in how to win Roblox and Minecraft, it was obvious that book fairs have come a long ways since my day. But, there was something more notable to me, than even the change in literary selections or the increase in prices. As the children came into the Library surrounded by all the shiny new things, crisp book pages, sparkly pens, and scented erasers, they were required to sit and have their regularly scheduled library time. Beginning, of course, with a song and dance to get out all the wiggles, then settling in quietly to hear a new book, working hard not to let their eager anticipation get the better of them. Until finally they were released to peruse all the novel items vying for their attention, and more so their money (if they had it). Now, making it apparent to me that not every child would be going home with a happy ending.

As I assisted the first group of children who ravaged the bookshelves, touching, moving, and shuffling around the meticulously arranged merchandise, some of the students would come up and ask, "how much is this?" Or, "How much is that?" Or my favorite, "Which ones are free?" One little girl in particular kept coming with various journals anxiously inquiring about the price. Each item was the same, \$15. And, each time she asked she went away a little less excited and a little more despondent. Until she finally stopped asking, sitting down quietly to wait for the rest of her classmates as they finished their perusal. In the same class another little boy eagerly shared with his friends what he was going to buy, continuously also me to inquire of the prices. And, like his classmate before him, as he heard the prices he continued to lose his excitement. Until his disappointment turned into a melt down of tears and confusion. It was obvious that there was a discrepancy within each of the classes, between those who had money, either bringing cash that day or having access at a later date, and those who did not. While it was much more obvious in the Kindergarten and 1st grade classes versus the 5th, whose students were more prepared for the bookfair division, it was still a disheartening reality.

Today we find Jesus in the last week of his life, traveling around Jerusalem, awaiting his eventual arrest and crucifixion. As two completely divergent groups joined together to set the bait for Jesus and finally catch him in their trap. Asking him, "Teacher... Tell us... what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" While the Pharisees would have been completely against the Roman Empire's tax, used to sustain the armies rule who inflicted domination and control over the Israelites. The Herodites would have been against anyone who spoke out against the status quo. And so, together the two worked together to completely entrap Jesus in a lose lose situation. And yet Jesus answers them brilliantly, using their own bait in turn to subdue and instead entrap them. As he asks, "Show me the coin used for the tax." A denarius, a full day's wage, held in the form of metal stamped with the image of the emperor and an inscription "God Augustus Caesar." A wholly offensive and blasphemous statement to the Jewish people, and the first law of our ten commandments, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." Expecting Jesus to rebuke the coin, and the tax itself, Jesus does the opposite. Instead he charges them with his own call, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

While I waited amidst class transitions, I overheard a phone conversation between one of the Librarians and a teacher. One of the Kindergarteners had incidentally snagged a few items from the book fair, not yet fully grasping the concept of cash in exchange for goods. While completely innocent, the items had to be returned. And as we waited for a T.A. to bring back the confiscated goods, the Librarian told me how hard it was for many of these kids, more so how much his heart broke for them. When the T.A. finally turned

over the books, the Librarian handed her four dollars and the confiscated pink poofy pen, “make sure your student gets this back” he told her. Turning to me the Librarian stated that he took this job in retirement. Not wanting to be bored at home, he hoped to enjoy time spent with the students and give back some of the knowledge and (I would add) compassion he had to share. But, he was concerned, as recounted a statistic he had heard earlier that week to me, regarding third grade reading levels and proficiency, as a determinant for the number of beds needed in the prison system over the next decade. While that statistic, which I had heard, is not at all fact, nor verified, it does speak to the larger problem we have in this nation, and our community. There are great disparities all around us, disparities that appear and feel very much insurmountable. And, while I wanted to leave school that day, hanging my head low, drowning in the confusion of an unfair world. I also found so much joy and love and beauty that day. Children I’d only just met, and barely spoke to, came up and hugged me. Teachers knowing their children by name spent time listening to their sorrows and wiping away their tears. Friends shared their newly purchased treasures with other friends who had none. Our community's own Partnership for Children showed up the next evening to give away free books, making sure everyone left that day with a happy ending. Allowing me the privilege of realizing that the three hours I spent there that day were well invested and better shared.

The question Jesus presents us with today is, “What is God’s?” And, if I have read my Bible properly, not literally, maybe not even fully, I would still have to answer EVERYTHING! The emperor may have inscribed his face on the coin and titled himself as a deity, but I’m not sure that makes it true. And, I’m not sure Jesus really cares, nor is that his real concern. While the little coin, which we have put so much value into may bear the emperor's face. We bear the image of God, forever and always! Unlike those coins, which will be reminted and restruck as soon as a new emperor takes control and power. What would it mean for us to live like we are stamped by God. Or more so to remember that everyone around us is as well! Would we change how we live?

We as human beings have the ability to do AMAZING things. We have traveled to space and are now exploring the galaxy. We have created a machine once, the size of a building, that now fits in our pocket, and adorns our wrist. We have even eradicated some of the world's most deadly diseases. This and more is a reminder of who we are, Divinely inspired and created beings! What more could we do if we remembered and lived out the sacredness of life, the Divine image that each and every one of us is stamped with? Would we share more, give more, love more? While the division and distinction between the haves and have nots in our world seems insurmountable, it is not. Because, as we have seen in the past and as we look towards the future, we are capable of amazing things. In and as much as we can give of ourselves, pointing all we are and all we have towards the one whose image we bear. Maybe by filling the blessing box, or joining a new ministry at church. Maybe by volunteering in our nursery, or at our Habitat build day on November 4th. Maybe by visiting one of our parishioners unable to leave their home, or coming and assisting at our Hot Dog Luncheon this Wednesday. Or maybe even asking me about our initiative to begin a volunteer reading program at our local elementary school (shameless plug). During this season as we remember our call to be good stewards I would encourage us to remember we are all bearers of the image of God, and so we are called to work together in order to direct ourselves and our world towards that Divine power and image of love, of grace, of resurrection!