

- 1) Have you ever sat on the sidelines of a contentious conversation?  
Not just an exchange of conflicting opinions,  
but a verbal martial arts match—each side circling the other,  
trying at once to elude the other, and to deliver a debilitating blow.  
Today we overhear not just one such conversation, but two.  
The stakes are high, the moves intense.  
The issues are image and identity, commitment and connection,  
issues with implications of life and death.  
Do they have any bearing on conversations in which you and I have a stake?  
Set that question aside for the moment, and just listen in on the back and forth.
- 2) *Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, Jesus? YES or NO!*  
Well, of course it's lawful in the Roman legal system—it's illegal if you don't.  
This is a bigger deal than failing to feed the parking meter in Bethesda.  
Israel is under the heavy thumb of Rome;  
and tax is one way Rome says: *Don't you forget it!*  
Herodians and Pharisees have come to question Jesus about this tax.  
The two groups don't like each other much.  
(Think Tea Party sympathizers and Wall Street occupiers.)  
Yet they join forces to stick Jesus with a question that will surely do him in.  
The Herodians don't have much problem with this law of Rome.  
*To get along, you go along*, they say, since not doing so is dangerous to your health.  
All Rome wants here, literally, is a token of acknowledgement.  
But what about God's law?  
For the Herodians, it can find its own level in the play of politics.  
They know Caesar isn't really God, even if, by paying tribute, they seem to say so.  
*Is it lawful to pay tax to Caesar, Jesus? YES or NO?*  
If he says NO, he's an anti-Roman insurrectionist, and he is toast.
- 3) The Pharisees who join the question have that other law in mind, God's Law,  
which has a thing or two to say about the question—well, three things, in fact:
  - 1) You shall have no other gods, no authority higher than the One  
who brought you out of bondage in Egypt.
  - 2) You shall not manufacture any image of any deity whatsoever,  
or act in any way that gives allegiance to what that image represents.
  - 3) You shall not misuse the name of the One God who IS God.To honor Caesar with an image of Caesar, say the Pharisees,  
that is in flat violation of God's law.  
*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, Jesus? YES or NO?*  
If he says YES, he is an idolater—and he is toast.
- 4) *Let's see one of those tribute coins*, says Jesus. They produce one in no time.  
Apparently they've had a visible image of this alien god in their pockets all the time.  
Just to make sure they get the point, Jesus quizzes them about the coin's inscription:  
What does it say? *Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, High Priest*  
It looks like the questioners have answered their own question, doesn't it?  
And, according to God's law, they condemn themselves in the process.

Clever block, Jesus! He's distracted everyone's attention from their "no win" question.

But this verbal martial artist isn't willing to settle for deflecting their blow.

He aims a kick of his own: *Give Caesar what's Caesar's; give God what's God's.*

Great sound bite! Jesus would score well in presidential debates!

Saying nothing substantial, but saying it brilliantly.

Has he really said nothing of substance?

Well, he has said more than a superficial hearing suggests.

This coin they have shown him—Caesar owns the coin already.

Even to pay off Caesar, they have to depend on Caesar.

Whether they pay it or try keep it,

the face on that coin reflects the fact that they are Caesar's slaves.

The question about this material coin is immaterial.

The real question is not YES or NO to Caesar; but YES or NO to God.

Perhaps, Jesus suggests, it is time to shift the discussion to the heart of the matter:

What are they giving, what allegiance do they show

to the one of whom they are forbidden ever to make an image?

The one whose image is more deeply etched within them

than Caesar's image can be branded on them.

So, says Jesus, *what are you folks doing to honor the image of God in you?*

That might just generate a more constructive conversation, don't you think?

But hold that question.

We have, remember, another contentious conversation on which to listen in.

5) *Please go with us—please, oh please—we just can't go without you!* Good grief!

Moses' winey plea to God sounds like a kid who won't go to kindergarten without his mommy.

After all God and Moses have been through together,

you'd think that Moses could just chill. But he can't. For good reason.

Things have changed, of late, for the worse, by far.

Out of Egypt and across the Red Sea, with a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night,

God had led the children of Israel to the Holy Mountain.

The mountain had belched with fire and smoke. Terrifying, but tangible.

With images like that the presence of God was palpable.

The symbol of that presence overwhelmed their eyes and ears--taste, touch and smell.

But when Moses went up the mountain to receive the law of God

(the one that forbids idolatry)

the people had a panic attack from sudden divine image deprivation.

If there were no signs of God's presence, how could they know God was there?

*If we can't see God, by God, we'll make a God we can see,* they said.

And they did, as we heard last week—a glittering golden calf.

They made a god image like the one the Egyptians had—

A counterfeit god—one by whom they had been cruelly incarcerated.

Why would they make a God like that? Well, it did have one thing going for it:

They could put themselves in bondage to something they could see.

Well, things went downhill from there. God got really mad—threatened to wipe them out.

Moses protested. God relented, but refused to go with them any longer.

(Said he'd send an angel guide instead.)

So Moses, in desperation, begs and pleads.

And God, surprisingly, seems to give in again: *My presence will go with you.*

After all that has happened, that sounds like a pretty sweet deal.

but Moses keeps right on begging, even after his petition has been granted.  
Now—if God just gives in, this is no martial arts match, is it? Oh yes it is.

Moses is not satisfied. He wants access to God, to know God's name, to see God's face.  
Well, why not?

Indeed, a few lines earlier in the book of Exodus, the story teller describes a scene  
where God confers with Moses, talking with him "*face to face, as one speaks to a friend.*"  
*More, more—let me see your face again,* Moses pleads. And God just says *NO.*

*My presence, that's a promise. And since you seem so desperate,  
I'll even grant you a glimpse of my glory. But my face you shall not see.*

Why? Perhaps because, in his very efforts to protect his countrymen  
against the implications of their idolatry,

Moses has, in his anxiety, tumbled headlong into idolatry himself—  
desperately seeking a sure thing to which he can cling.

A corner on God, a handle on God,

enough control of God to make sure he doesn't have to totally depend on God.

Furious with his people for fabricating a golden calf,

Moses, I think, tries to make, of the God beyond all images,  
a Golden Calf of his own projections.

And God tells Moses *We aren't going there. My back, OK; My face, no way.*

*I will clearly show you where I've been, but, while I promise to go with you,  
I will not show you where we're going until we get there together.*

There is, you see, a distinction between the presence of God as promised fact,  
and the images of God by means of which we try to grasp God—  
images partial at best, projections at worst.

No wonder, in the Covenant forged with God's chosen people,

God says not only: No other Gods, but no misuse of the One there is,  
and no surrogates--No Golden Calves, no Divine Caesars—  
no glittering images, only a promised Real Presence.

- 6) And that, I think, is a good starting point for constructive conversations  
about the images by means of which we shape our identity in the Body of Christ—  
about our connections and commitments in the world  
by which we embody that identity.

Give to culture what belongs to culture; and give to God what belongs to God:  
technological products, financial policies, physical possessions,  
political passions, religious professions—

you and I cannot worship the God who made all those without employing every one.

The question is: how do we employ them without being owned by them.

For while we do get caught up in all of them, we do not belong to any of them.

Rather, we belong to the One beyond all images in whose image we are made. So:

- How, with the icons of our i-phones and i-pads,  
do we use them as icons of the Holy, rather than as addictive idols?  
There's a conversation to be started there.
- How, in personal finance and social policy,  
do we keep our bank accounts and portfolios from becoming Golden Calves—  
anxiously clung to, ends in themselves,

rather than means for connecting us to those  
who need ways of making money for food and shelter,  
not ways of making money to make more money?

There's a conversation to be started there.

- How, in the stuff we acquire, is the substance of God's grace made tangibly manifest, not just to, but through us?  
There's a conversation in that question.
- How can we conduct political discourse in ways that focus attention on the issues, rather than who is up and who is down in the most recent opinion poll?  
How we need to have that conversation!
- How, at the church of the Redeemer, can our practice of the presence of God be a way of engaging that presence,  
not just an anxious fret about how to get it right?

It is good to have conversations about that.

God's going with us is a given. God's real presence is a promise.

How can our imaginations open to that presence in the journey,  
rather than getting distracted by glittering images along the way?

Give culture it's due—whatever it is, says Jesus.

Give God God's due—whatever it is, says Jesus.

In Matthew's story, Jesus' answer to his hostile questioners is a real conversation stopper.

For us who seek to own our dependence on God without attempting to own God,  
the answer Jesus gives us is a real conversation starter.