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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X40
20 Pentecost (Proper 24A) 8:30, 11:00 a.m., Eucharist, 3:00 p.m. ES
Sunday 22 October 2017

Isaiah 45:1-7
Ps 96:1-9 (10-13)
1 Thess. 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

Tyranny of the Emperor

"I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places" (Isa. 45).

1. What is your brand, your style, your look? What values do you communicate in your gestures and talk, how you buy, eat, read and live? Young people today refer to their "brand" in a way that I would never have imagined a decade ago. In some ways we have become more aware of how companies and politicians manipulate and control us.

Today, "nearly two-thirds of Americans get at least some of their news from social media."¹ It seems as if mass communications cannot be separated from mass manipulation. Every day we make so many conscious and unconscious decisions about how to present ourselves online.

On Tuesday *The New York Times* had an article about a self-improvement course for women that devolved into a kind of cult. Attracted by the promise of personal empowerment, initiates were forced to provide compromising photos or stories about themselves. Leaders threatened that this "collateral" would be used against them if they tried to leave.²

The leaders called themselves "masters" and the newer women assigned to them "slaves." In this pyramid scheme, every night and morning slaves are required to send text messages to their master. If their master sends them a message, they have sixty seconds to respond or to suffer consequences. The initiation ritual involves being stripped, held down and branded below the hip bone with a "cauterizing device." The brand contains the initials of the male supreme leader (who is also known as "the Vanguard").

No matter how badly we want to be empowered we cannot accomplish this without being dependent on something else. We bear the mark of that dependency. It is part of our brand.

In 1979 Bob Dylan released a song about this experience. He says, "You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride / You may be a city councilman taking bribes on the side / You may be working in a barbershop, you may know how to cut hair / You may be somebody's mistress, may be somebody's heir. / But you're gonna have to serve somebody... / Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord. But you're gonna have to serve somebody."³

2. Most often we use the expression “rendering to Caesar” as if God deserves a little of this and the government is entitled to a little of that. Jesus has something far more compelling in mind than this. Jesus strikes at the heart of our identity, our brand.

After the people had thrown palms before his path and celebrated Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem, Pharisees send their students along with the Herodians to trap him. Both groups wanted political independence for Israel and hoped to discredit Jesus, to dissipate his remarkable power.

They begin by flattering him. They say he is authentic, that he speaks the truth. In the Bob Dylan sense they say that he does not serve anyone, that he is independent and impartial (the Greek expression literally means to decide without seeing a person’s face).

These religious leaders put Jesus in a double bind. They ask him, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, or not” (Mt. 22). Jesus fully understands the stakes. Our translation says Jesus is, “aware of their malice,” and calls them hypocrites. He knows that if he says the tax is lawful he will be discredited among the people. And if he says it is unlawful he knows that the Imperial authorities will arrest him.

Instead Jesus says, “show me the coin used for the tax.” He then asks them whose eikon or image and inscription are on the coin. The students of the Pharisees and the Herodians answer “the Emperor.” And Jesus famously replies “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Except that’s not quite right the word. *Didomi* means to give, *paradidomi* means to pay back. More literally “pay back what belongs to the emperor and pay back what belongs to God.”

Some argue that in providing the denarius, the coin, the religious leaders have violated the first two commandments against having other gods and making images of god. In any event they are amazed and leave him.

What astonishes me about this exchange is that today the whole structure of Roman society with its emperor, slaves, centurions, temples, and coliseums, all that everyone in this story took for granted and seemed everlasting, is gone. And these simple words of Jesus are still with us. What would have been obvious to the first hearers of this gospel needs careful explanation in our time.

So let’s begin at home with the family. In Roman times, the *pater familias* had absolute authority over the family to the point where he could take the lives of anyone in the household with impunity. The *pater patriae*, literally the father of the fatherland, or the emperor, had the same power over everything and everyone in the empire. The emperor, the Caesar, is an image of god. In the same way the coin is an image of the emperor.⁴

Jesus says that rather than worship an image of a false image of god, dedicate yourself to the true God. He goes beyond that. Every person bears the stamp of God from the moment of our creation. Each person is a true image of God. Jude Harmon points out the perverse irony that the Emperor does not even understand his own real value.

This is partly because in Rome, by senatorial decree or self-proclamation, the Emperor was a god. This false reality was backed up by the full power of the state's propaganda. The image of the emperor was ever-present on coins, statues, and military insignia. Authorities forced people to worship the Emperor.

In Marguerite Yourcenar's novel *Memoirs of Hadrian* she tries to imagine what this felt like. In this fictional letter to Marcus Aurelius, Hadrian says, "I began to feel divine... as near perfection as my nature would permit, in fact, eternal."⁵ According to this imagined Hadrian, love was a kind of control over others and in his life only perfectly achieved at one time, in one person – Antinoös (an exception to Bob Dylan's rule).

When his lover Antinoös drowned in the Nile River in 130 AD, the Emperor Hadrian built a whole city in his memory along with twenty-eight temples throughout the Empire. He made two thousand sculptures so that we have more statues (115) of Antinoös than any other classical figure with the exception of Augustus and Hadrian. The practical effect of this state propaganda is to always remind you that you owe your very life to the emperor. What the emperor loves, you must love, because the emperor is always there.

3. At this point we have reached what Puritan sermons called "the Application." What I said might sound like ancient history, but rulers still strain to be everywhere at all times. Visiting Kenya in the 1980's I remember the ubiquitous official portrait of President Daniel T. arap Moi (1924-). You could find it even in the smallest most remote tea shop. A friend joked about it until we heard that people were beaten for disrespecting the image.

This brings us to an issue that has been especially troubling for me. At the end of last summer San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick (1987-) began protesting police brutality against people of color by sitting during the national anthem. Since then other players have joined this protest. Recently the president has repeatedly condemned these players and called for owners to fire them. He has ignored their complaint about racial injustice and has said that this action showed a lack of respect for people who serve in the military.

With so many issues and other injustices in the world I have been surprised by how much this upset me. Although I have not heard anyone describe it in this way, for me this is a religious issue. The president of the United States and owners of professional

football teams should not compel anyone when it comes to patriotic displays – especially when this is a matter of moral conscience. The whole point of our national anthem should involve the freedom of choosing how and whether to participate. For me it feels like an empire forcing someone to pray. It is treating the nation and its leader as a god.

But this is only one of many possible examples that we see today as humans usurp the reverence that should belong only to God. Through social media, through the invocations of those who either revere or hate him, we have given the president a power over our conscious thoughts that no person has had in history.

So let me ask again knowing that you gotta serve somebody. In this world where power comes from dependence and everything comes from God – what is your brand? Around you some might have it seared on their hip, or bestowed on them through text messages. It may be part of their pride in belonging to a secret society. For others it is instantiated by statues, political parties and social media.

In this vast and beautiful and sometimes cruel world love is not control over others. We will never be satisfied by worshiping the father of the Fatherland. You and the emperor and everyone you meet shine with God's glory. Through our actions and words let us help others to see the stamp of our maker. Let our god be God. Let our image be the image of the true God.

¹ Social Media companies are not benevolent “curators” of information but have a direct stake in keeping you in their particular ecosystem even if that is accomplished by falsehoods. Benedict Carey, “How Fiction Becomes Fact on Social Media,” *The New York Times*, 20 October 2017.

² Barry Meier, “Inside a Secretive Group Where Women Are Branded,” *The New York Times*, 17 October 2017. Barry Meier, “Complaints About Branding Inside Secretive Group Are Under Review,” *The New York Times*, 19 October 2017.

³ Bob Dylan, “Gotta Serve Somebody,” *Slow Train Coming*, 1979. “You may be an ambassador to England or France / You may like to gamble, you might like to dance / You may be the heavyweight champion of the world / You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls. // But you’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed / You’re gonna have to serve somebody, / It may be the devil or it may be the Lord / But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.” Thanks for Eric Shafer “You’re Gonna Have to Serve Somebody,” Day1 22 October 2017.

⁴ These three paragraphs come from my conversation with Jude Harmon 19 October 2017.

⁵ Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian* tr. Grace Frick (NY: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1974) 144, 155.