

“Got Change?”

Sermon by Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
October 22, 2017

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Exodus 33:12-33

Matthew 22:15-22

If you look at currency from any country, the face of the coin or bill tells you a little bit about what the country has valued historically, and what it hopes to be-- although since the US paper currency only has white men to this date, I hope it speaks more to the country's historical values than aspirational values or hopes for the future. I know the US Treasury in 2016 had proposed to put Harriet Tubman on the face of the \$20 bill, but it is pretty clear that bill will not materialize anytime soon. It would be ironic, however, since the figure currently on the \$20 bill whom she would replace is Andrew Jackson, who was a slave owner. The double irony is that this country's economy began on the backs of slave labor; some questioned whether it would be an insult to Harriet Tubman, who as an abolitionist fought slavery and led the Underground Railroad, to have her image as the face of a system she fought to abolish. As writer Feminista Jones put it, *Harriet Tubman did not fight for capitalism, free trade, or competitive markets. She repeatedly put herself in the line of fire to free people who were treated as currency themselves. She risked her life to ensure that enslaved black people would know they were worth more than the blood money that exchanged hands to buy and sell them. I do not believe Tubman, who died impoverished in 1913, would accept the "honor."*<sup>1</sup>

When the Pharisees and the Herodians asked Jesus whether it is legal for a man of God to pay taxes, it was a trap. Between the Pharisees, who saw the pagan emperor as a threat to Jewish nationalism, and the Herodians, who protected the interests of empire and enjoyed its benefits, both a yes

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and a no answer would have been damning for Jesus. Instead Jesus reframed the story, asking, “Whose head and title is on the face of this coin? Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor, and give to God the things that are God’s.” Poet Audre Lorde once wrote “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” Jesus also lets us know the tools of empire will not be the tools that build the peace of God here on earth.

The street artist Banksy painted a mural in London of a man sitting on the curb, holding up a sign as if begging for money. His sign, however, said “Keep your coins, I want change.” The story Jesus was trying to tell could not be told using the currency of empire. His story was one that would *change* the face empire; and it would change the story of how people would come to know God. Jesus’ story was priceless.

This story was already at work in God’s relationship with Moses. When Moses asked to see God, God told him: “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” And instead, God gave Moses something more lasting than a face, more powerful than the coin of empire: God tucked Moses into the cleft of a rock, and then the *kavod*, or glory of God, passed over Moses. Moses was changed in this encounter, and his leadership from there shifted from being leader of a people who had been enslaved, to leader of a people who would be free.

Jesus’ witness continued to reveal God’s glory here on earth as he changed lives, and changed culture. But change is not easy. People were not ready for new stories-- they had figured out ways to play their roles in the stories they had been assigned to, even when these roles and stories were not very good ones.

It causes me to take heart when I see people who have the courage to create a different story than the stories of empire, of domination and

oppression. It has taken much bravery for those who have stepped forward with the #MeToo campaign. If you've missed it on social media, there has been a movement going around with the message, "Me too. If all the women and transpeople who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too.' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem. #MeToo." I have noticed the swell of people who have added their names to the Me Too campaign. They have been celebrities, senators, people in this congregation. As I have spoken to various women over this past week, everyone has agreed that this experience is just about universal for women. There are some men out there too who have been assaulted, but speaking out goes against the "bro code" that demands macho prowess. No matter how many people have spoken up with a "Me Too," there has been little acknowledgement of "It was me. I'm sorry, and here's how I will change."

But Jesus calls us to something higher than the stories we have become accustomed to, both individually and as a whole people of God: men, women, all genders. The church reformers of 500 + years ago sensed a story that was bigger than their own personal salvation and bigger even than the established Roman church. These Reformers believed that God had yet more light to shine: on our understandings of scripture, on roles between clergy and laity, on how we live out God's call, and even on how we might receive God's glory. A phrase of some Protestant reformers was "*Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda*: The Church Once Reformed, Always Reforming." And so we have been open to how the Holy Spirit has been called to change the church and calling the church to change society. And so we come together in hopes of becoming part of a greater story. We do not have to play tired and outdated roles. We do not have to accept injustices as the way the world goes. Right after this sermon, we will have a Ritual of Anointing and Prayer for Healing. In that time, I invite you to pray for the changes you would like to see with your own healing, and also for the healing of our culture.

Giving your money to the people whose pictures are on the money seems like a bad message to start our Stewardship season out with. I am all in favor of paying taxes for good schools and teachers, lifesaving services, caring for people in need-- and the people of Jesus' time did not see those same kinds of services for the taxes they paid, which mostly went to enrich the Emperor. But what about the church? The truth is that the church can really use those checks and bills to tell a compelling and even transformative story, through our education, preaching, witness to the gospel, and service to the community. The Roman coins of Jesus' day bore the image of the emperor. Bible commentator Debie Thomas notes that "As human beings created by God, we bear God's image. Which means, if we keep the analogy going, that we owe God everything—our whole and entire selves."<sup>2</sup> Let us put our own faces to the story God is writing with us and through us. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Debie Thomas, "Living by the Word: October 22" in *The Christian Century*, Sept. 21, 2017