

Image of God
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Resurrection Lutheran Church – Chicago
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Dear Sisters and Brothers, Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ, Amen.

So, you've maybe heard this Gospel story before, where they're kind of testing Jesus, trying to trap him about asking whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the Roman empire, and Jesus asks to see a coin, and he asks, whose likeness is on the coin? They answer, Caesar's, Jesus says, therefore give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's. I've heard this story preached and talked about in a lot of ways, sometimes talking about that we have to analyze how much of our money we give to the church and how much for ourselves, and the thing is, none of that has anything to do with what this story is about. What is this story about you might ask? I'll get to that in a moment.

It's a great honor to be here with you in worship today. I am Kevin Massey, I'm the Director of Lutheran Disaster Response. Thank you for your prayers and support and volunteering as part of Lutheran Disaster Response. Lutheran Disaster Response I think is one of the best programs of the ELCA, and that's because it's a channel to help Lutherans everywhere do what they do best, to love and serve our neighbors at all times, and especially when our neighbors are in need. Lutheran Disaster Response works through Lutheran congregations, and synods, and Lutheran Social Service organizations to assist people in many ways. We Lutherans have a heritage in Lutheran Disaster Response of staying with communities for the long haul. While other organizations do important work in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, our Heritage in Lutheran Disaster Response is to stay for as long as recovery takes.

There are Lutherans volunteering this weekend in Minot North Dakota where floods ravaged that city last July. There are Lutherans volunteering this weekend in Pennsylvania where areas were affected by Hurricane Irene. There are Lutheran farmers from Iowa right now who are helping ranchers in Texas affected by drought and wildfire by shipping them hay from their own bumper crop. The common thread in all those wonderful ways that Lutherans are helping their neighbors in need is that it is really the work of volunteers that make it happen.

I want to introduce you to a wonderful volunteer I met a couple years ago. A couple years ago we were working in New Orleans repairing a Katrina damaged home for a family there. I was working with a group of volunteers we had assigned to this work site, and we had a volunteer that week who was amazing. His name was Bert, and he was from Kansas City. Bert is actually a member of a United Church of Christ congregation, but had come down to work on this site. Bert, I could see right away, wasn't like a lot of volunteers in that Bert had professional level contractor skills. Bert we saw move effortlessly from roofing, to hanging sheet rock to installing

kitchen cabinets to tiling a floor. Bert did amazing work that would have cost thousands of dollars that this family couldn't afford, but Bert donated his time and talent and energy and made a big difference for helping this family get back home.

As we worked I said to Bert, so Bert, you're obviously so talented in so many areas of general contracting, what area do you work in the most? Do you work for somebody or do you have your own business? Bert told me, Well actually I'm a lawyer, but I worked for my father and brother who are contractors through college and law school, and I just love being able to do this kind of work because I feel like I'm really doing something that matters.

So, you know, shame on me, in a way, because when I had worked with Bert, and had seen what Bert can do, I didn't see a lawyer, I saw a skilled carpenter and contractor, and it reminded me that you can never know when looking on the outside who somebody really is, and all that they are and all that they offer. And that's what the story about Jesus and the coin is actually about.

They were testing Jesus trying to trap him in an answer about whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the Roman empire, and Jesus asked to see a coin and he asked, whose likeness is on the coin? They answered, Caesar's, Jesus said, therefore give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's. When Jesus said, whose likeness is it, our translation said whose head is this...the actual word in the Greek New Testament there is eikon, the same word we use for an icon, like a religious picture, but in Greek eikon just means likeness or image, and importantly it's the word that they used the first time they translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek for the passage in the creation where it says. So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. So what this really means is that Jesus says, give to Caesar the things that are in the image of Caesar, but give to God what is in the image of God, that is our very selves.

For me it's sometimes hard to think about what it means to be in the image of God. When I look up on me and my life, I can see much that isn't very Godly, the mistakes I've made, things I've said, thoughts I've had. I am assured of forgiveness by baptism into Christ, but that doesn't mean that it's any easier to think about being in the image of God.

That's why it's a word of amazing grace this morning for Jesus to say, Give to God the things that are Gods, Give to God that which is in the image of God, namely ourselves. For this means that it's not some sanitized version of you that God wants you to give, it's not some fictional you that you wish existed. It's not some you that other people wish you were, it is the real you, exactly as you are that God sees in his own image, the real you, exactly as you are that he sees himself in, and loves and wants to enfold in. All the things that we may think make us ungodly, make us not in his image, God knows all about them, and loves and you exactly as you are, not in spite of who you are, but every bit because of who you are, everything that are, everything that you bring.

This means God isn't waiting for us to be perfected and all figured out before he loves us and wants us to give ourselves to him. God isn't waiting for us to be perfect and all figured out before he loves other people and cares for other people THROUGH US. It is through real people exactly as they are like you and me that God is caring for others, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, standing up with those pushed to the edges.

In the ELCA we have this great phrase for thinking about exactly that, this Christian life of being loved by God exactly as we are, and then turning around and loving other people exactly as they are...it's this phrase God's work, our Hands. God's work, Our Hands. That means that God's hands have got some scars on them. God's hands have got a spot where a hammer missed the nail and split open a finger nail. God's hands have got some dough stuck to the sleeve from kneading out some bread. God's hands smell like all the work that God's hands have ever gotten in to. God's work, Our hands.

So last year Lutheran Disaster Response was helping with another project, this time in Cedar Rapids Iowa where terrible floods had struck in 2008. I was helping with the final step in completing a home that had flooded, and the last step was to paint the exterior. Everything indoors had been finished and the family was ready to move out of temporary housing back in to their own home. From working on painting the exterior, you could see where the high water mark of the flood had come to, above the level of the main first floor of the house.

As we worked, I could see in a window that the living room and dining room floors of the house were this beautiful hard wood floor, but I knew that the flood water level had gone above that floor. I asked the manager of this project about that, whether somehow the beautiful hardwood floor had been undamaged, or what had happened. She explained, No the flood destroyed the floor, it all had to be ripped up, and we were going to replace it with a simple laminate flooring, but a couple weeks ago we had a volunteer come to work for a week who helped one day in tearing out the ruined old hard wood floor, and this volunteer said, I can put in a new hard wood floor to replace this. And the manager, she explained "this volunteer worked really hard and he was clearly a professional, he did perfect professional work putting down a new floor, and staining it, and polishing it, it's the nicest hardwood floor I've seen, this volunteer was amazing, it was some guy named Bert from Kansas City. God's work, Bert's hands.

Amen.