

Matthew 22:15-20 *Growing Together 3: In Whose Image? 1939-1972*

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

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Matthew 22:15-22

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, "Whose image is this, and whose title?" 21 They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." 22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Those words of Jesus, to “give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” have frequently been cited as a biblical rationale for compartmentalization. It was, in fact, one of the key passages underlying “The Spirituality of the Church,” a particular theological stance in which most white, Southern Presbyterians were trained, that the church should focus on the salvation of souls, and leave political matters to the state. This “Spirituality of the Church” had allowed good, white Christians before the Civil War to preach Jesus to Black people while also enslaving them; and to endorse Jim Crow after the war’s end.

This theology, though, of the separation between spiritual matters and political matters, ignores the first part of Jesus' words here. As the Pharisees try to trap him by asking him whether a good Jew like himself should pay taxes to Caesar, he shows them the denarius with Augustus' face on it and asks: "Whose *image* is shown here?" and *then* goes on, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." What is central to this declaration is the word "image," which we first hear in the book of Genesis, when all things are created by God, and then human beings are made *in God's image*. If that is the case, then, underlying Jesus' words is the implication that *nothing* truly belongs to the emperor: that all things and, even more, all people belong to God, because they bear God's image.

That question of the image of God is central to the years in our church's life that we'll be examining today. It's the question of who is truly made in God's image. And even more, it is a question of the image that the church attributed to God. Because if God is seen as white, then white people are the only ones truly made in God's image, and, therefore, the only people who are fully human. And if God blesses the status quo and stays safely out of political issues, then anyone who challenges that status quo is actually going against God's own will.

So, when we left our story last time, Dr. Mordecai had been fired, taking more than 200 members with him; the church was in debt, the Great Depression was raging, Rev. John Alexander had come in to try to pull things back together, but left feeling that he had failed.

In 1939, though, things were turning around. The **Great Depression** was easing, **membership had started to increase** again, and then, in 1941, **World War II**, with its demand for steel, spurred another growth period for Birmingham. The war also demanded sacrifices, and a huge number of our church's young men and women answered the call, as seen by **this list from 1944**.

The **end of the war** meant the return of young people, and the start of the **Baby Boom**. White veterans came back to a hero's welcome and the economic boost of **The GI Bill**, and, according to the online Encyclopedia of Alabama, Blacks and women who had been working here in Birmingham during the war were forced to give up their jobs to those returning white veterans.¹ In contrast, **Black veterans** were mostly blocked from the GI Bill's benefits; and many of those veterans, who proudly returned in their uniforms, were greeted with violence to put them back in their place. This is **Isaac Woodard**. He served four years and earned a battle star. On his bus ride home from the army, he asked to get off to use the restroom. The

¹ Encyclopediaofalabama.org

bus driver got angry and called the police, who pulled Woodard off of the bus and beat him so badly he was blinded for life. He had been discharged for just four and a half hours.²

But all of this was outside the church, which was blissfully growing in membership and finances. In **1946, they called Dr. Ed Ramage**, who promptly married Katherine Watters, a daughter of the church. In his first seventeen years here, the church added all the **stained glass windows**, the amazing pipe organ, the educational wing to accommodate all those children, and another octave to the carillon. The membership expanded to its all-time high of 800 people; and in 1962, the church celebrated its 90th anniversary [show brochure] with plans to burn the mortgage, broaden benevolence, get even more members, and increase activities. Everything looked bright.

Except, the separation between what was the emperor's and what was God's was wearing thin. *Brown v. The Board of Education* had outlawed school segregation in 1954, but there was still no change. In a state whose motto is, "Our rights we will defend," Black Alabamians were taking that motto seriously, speaking out and marching in the streets. The whole city was on-edge.

² Nikole Hannah-Jones, *The Idea of America*, in "The 1619 Project" (*The New York Times*, August 18, 2019) pp. 19

To try and calm things down, in **January and April of 1963**, Dr. Ramage and seven other white clergy issued public statements urging an end to the demonstrations. Instead, they encouraged the Black citizens of Birmingham to seek their rights through the courts and through negotiations, and to follow the law in the meantime.

Ramage and the other clergy were actually sympathetic to the demands for Civil Rights. Ramage, himself, had been desperately poor during the Depression. When he first graduated from seminary he was without a job, and was essentially homeless, hitchhiking to cities to find any work he could, and begging for food. So he felt a strong kinship with the poor and downtrodden, including African-Americans; but he was also steeped in “The Spirituality of the Church” that called for Christians not to rock the civic boat.

Furthermore, for those white clergy to urge their Black kindred to work through the courts was especially myopic, given that just two days before their first statement, **Gov. George Wallace** had declared “Segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!” meaning that, no matter what the courts decided, the highest office in the state was not to going to follow the ruling.

From his cell in the Birmingham jail, **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**, responded scathingly to the clergymen's statement, and Dr. Ramage was convicted by his words. Even before that, though, on **Easter Sunday**, Ramage had made sure that any African-Americans who showed up that day would be welcomed with civility. Two young women did come, and at their next meeting on April 21st, the session took up the issue of what to do in the future. Dr. Ramage, moved by Dr. King's letter, declared, "**We are committed to open the doors for worship to all who come to worship.**"

Though there were those who supported this stance, Ramage received the wrath of many church members, his tires were slashed, and his family was the target of death threats. According to the historian S. Jonathan Bass, "one unyielding segregationist member explained that the only salvation for the church was to 'get rid of the Communists,' and she pointed a quivering finger at Ramage and identified him as 'one of the biggest.'"³

Meanwhile, the turmoil outside the church was growing. On September 4, several Black students became the first to **integrate Birmingham schools**. Twelve days

³ S. Jonathan Bass, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), p.85.

later, White Supremacist terrorists bombed the **16th Baptist Church** killing four little girls. The nation was in shock.

Back here at First Presbyterian, Ramage's ministry was unraveling. He was fifty-six years old, he had been here eighteen years— still the longest pastorate in this church's history, and had almost certainly expected to retire from this place. Now, though, the church was divided, and he could barely function. Several church members here found another pastorate for him in Texas, and he left to go there, feeling that he had failed as a pastor. He never truly recovered.

But even with his departure, there was no keeping out the issues of the day.

Throughout 1964, the session grappled with **what to do about “negro” visitors**.

Motions varied from **seating them in the balcony**—that motion failed; to **refusing admission altogether** “under present conditions.” That motion passed.

At a later meeting, they amended that to say that they would **set aside part of the sanctuary for any visitors who refused to leave**, so as “not to cause a disturbance.” As they wrestled with these decisions, the turmoil was taking a toll.

At one session meeting, one elder reportedly said, “To hell with Christian principles, we’ve got to save the church!”⁴

In January of **1965** they called a new pastor, Dr. Hay. As that Easter approached, at a special meeting, it was decided, if “any Negroes visit...[to have] Ushers quietly seat them in any convenient pew available without disturbing worshippers...”

Notice that, even as the elders surrender to the situation, any Black people who come are “visitors,” while white people are “worshippers.”

All of this was having an effect on membership. I couldn’t find the membership numbers, but in 1966, the session cleaned rolls and removed 100 members. Still, things didn’t let up. Along *with* the Civil Rights Movement, the **Vietnam War** and the conflict around *that* was escalating; and in **1968, Dr. King and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated.**

Those of us who shake our fist at 2020 can look back on this timeline and remember, there have been other years that make this year look like a cakewalk.

⁴ Bass, p. 86

In 1972, the church celebrated its 100th anniversary, with a **booklet** that gives glowing details of every decade through the 1950's, but includes only a glancing reference to "the trying 1960's," and no wonder.

So, in whose image are we made? This church was founded by white people in a time of White Supremacy. Ironically, for all of the hysteria over "negro visitors," Black people had always been in this church. The *History of Women's Work* written in 1930 ends with a loving tribute to "Old Gus ...and of Uncle Alec and Aunt Ella...who have ...been in service in the 'Old First,'"—concluding in a heartfelt poem that one member wrote for these "friends of the colored race" in the cringe-worthy Blackvoice of minstrelsy, about the wisdom of knowing their place. They were beloved, but they were the help. They did not bear the image of who belonged here.

In the stained glass windows that were installed just four years before *Brown v The Board of Education*, the images of all the Hebrew prophets, the disciples, and of Jesus, himself, are bleached of any Jewishness or Middle-Eastern-ness, into what one of our current session members has referred to as "Swedish Jesus," though, being Presbyterian, it's probably actually Scottish Jesus. In fairness, that wasn't unique to this church. Even 16th St. Baptist had a stained glass window of White

Jesus. When the church was bombed and the girls were killed, the only damage the blast did to the stained glass was to blow out the white face of Jesus.

And our image, too—the image that First Presbyterian had of Jesus, was being shaken to the core. And that mattered. It mattered because the image we have of Christ affects who we think bears that image; and it matters because, as Paul reminds us in our Thessalonians reading, we are called to imitate Christ. So, what image of Christ was this church going to imitate? Christ, the pale emperor of the status quo? Or Christ of the downtrodden, speaking fierce truth to the powerful until they hung him from a tree?

One hundred years in, that was still an open question.