**19 Pentecost, Oct. 19, 2014;Ex 33:12-23; Ps99; 1 Thess 1:1-10; Matt 22: 15-22; Rev. Mary S. Trainor**

Ah, we have some wonderful mammals here in Wisconsin -- with beautiful fur coats. Mink, ermine, otter, beaver, and even raccoons. Trapping is a popular hobby here, and some people use it as a way to supplement their income. To trap a mammal, the trapper builds or buys a trap, gets bait, and sets it in a location where the mammal is expected to naturally wander; then checks it. There is no point in going to all that trouble if one does not set the trap up properly. This morning's Gospel is about trapping too: experts in the law trying to trap Jesus--because He was a threat to their worldly power. They wanted to be rid of Him. And, oh my, did they set up their trap expertly--they had done their preparations carefully! They asked Jesus, "***tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"*** This was a gottcha question that they thought He would get trapped with either one of the two answers. If He spoke against paying taxes to Caesar, He would be committing treason (and therefore they could have Him arrested). And, if he spoke in favor of paying the taxes then this could have been interpreted as setting aside God's law. One way Jesus would have upset the religious leaders, the other way it would have upset the Roman authorities. But Jesus, being God, saw what they were doing and outsmarted them. He not only did not get trapped, but He used it as an opportunity to teach about faith.

Jesus answered them this way, "***Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's***." In other words, He honors both obligations to God and to the civil authorities. Jesus acknowledges that there is a cost to being members of society, but we belong to God and Caesar belongs to God. Community is part of God's plan; yes there is a cost to our civilized way of living. The Pharisees were looking for a way out of having to pay taxes to Caesar, but Jesus did not give them that out -- but rather puts things into perspective. We are citizens of both an earthly realm and a spiritual realm -- **and God is above it all.** Jesus uses the coin to illustrate this point. Yes, we live under this government and have to pay taxes, but we belong to God. **It is all God's.** The coin of our lives is the likeness of God, which we bear. Genesis 1:27, says, ***“God created humankind in His image, in the image of God He created them; male and female.”*** The divine image is stamped upon us and it cannot be rubbed off.

In our Gospel today, powerful people who plotted to trap Jesus failed -- Jesus not only outsmarted them, but He used it as a teaching opportunity. Yes, we are in trapping season here in Wisconsin and we can see this as an opportunity to share our faith. We are surrounded by people who are trapped in lives of fear and anxiety, materialism, frustration, anxiety, anger, judgment. Oh, the traps look very different than the ones in the woods trapping small mammals or the one that Jesus faced in today's Gospel-- but they are traps nevertheless. The traps around us are things that pull us away from God. Our computers and TV are major sources of these traps; they can permeate us without us realizing it. It matters what we set our minds on, it matters whose image we see is stamped on us. Paul said in last week's Epistle reading from Philippians 4:9: "***whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things .. and the God of peace will be with you."***

Indeed, God's peace that passes all understanding will permeate our lives, will prevent us from being trapped, if we put God first. As our 1st Thessalonians reading said this morning, "***Jesus... rescues us***." Today, claim your identity as God's, put God first, don't allow yourself to be trapped by things of the world, and share God's love and peace with others. As it says in today's Psalm 99, "***Proclaim the greatness of the Lord our God and fall down before his footstool; He is the Holy One."*** Amen.