Saint Stephen's
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost – October 18, 2026

Image and Likeness of God

Isaiah 45:1-7; Psalm 96:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22



[Matthew 22:15-22] The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" 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." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Today's gospel finds Jesus at an especially volatile moment. He has entered Jerusalem for the last time. He has driven the money changers and animal vendors from the Temple, healed the blind and lame, and challenged the integrity of the city's religious leaders.

When they question Jesus' authority, he responds with three parables that expose their self-righteousness. Threatened, but afraid to seize him in front of the crowds, they try another way: they will trap him in his own words. And so they return to spar with him in the Temple, armed with several provocative questions.

The first of these question drives today's gospel reading. The Pharisees, who resented Roman rule, and the Herodians, whose power depended on it, become unlikely allies to trap him. They approach Jesus with flattery and ask him, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

They have given him an impossible choice. Many Jews bitterly resented the tax as a symbol of Roman occupation. If Jesus says to pay it, he betrays the people who follow him. If he says not to, he can be reported to Rome for treason.

A loaded question asked in bad faith, with no safe answer. That may sound familiar. We live in a time when political loyalty is often valued more highly than truth, when questions are designed to trap opponents rather than deepen understanding, and when acts of violence and cruelty are defended in the name of national security or political necessity. Amid so much uncertainty and noise, we long for solid ground, a clear and steady voice of truth that helps us sort through the competing claims on our allegiance.

Jesus cuts through the noise with a simple request: "Show me the coin used for the tax." They produce a denarius that features the emperor's profile with the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus." The other side reads "High Priest."

Everything about this coin offends Jewish faith – the graven image, the claim to divinity, and the emperor's seizure of religious authority. Jesus doesn't have a coin. They do. And they are carrying it in the Temple, the very place he has just cleared of money changers.

Jesus asks the leaders, "Whose image is this?" and they reply, "The emperor's." He then tells them, "Give

to Caesar, therefore, the things that are Caesar's, and to God, the things that are God's." The leaders are amazed. Jesus has reframed the question entirely, literally saying, "Sure, give to the emperor the things that bear his image and likeness, but you must give to God that which bears God's image and likeness."

And what is that? In the first chapter of Genesis, God creates the heavens and the earth, the seas and dry land, and every living creature, calling it all good. Then God says, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness."

This is a foundational belief of Christianity – we are made in God's image, with the divine spark planted deep within us. It is not something we earn or achieve; it is our birthright. It is who we are. And we grow into God's likeness when we learn to live as Jesus did, with integrity, compassion, and justice. This is how we participate in God's work of healing and reconciliation for all creation.

And if we bear God's image, our whole lives *belong* to God. And because we all belong to God, we are family. We belong to each other.

But what does it mean to belong? At the women's retreat last weekend, we spent some time exploring that question and concluded together that we know we belong when we are fully seen and loved just as we are. When we can be imperfect and vulnerable, yet still essential to the fullness of a family or community's life.

Belonging is different from "fitting in," the social skill of noticing what gets approval, which opinions are welcome, and what parts of ourselves are better left unmentioned. Knowing where and to whom we belong is a deep human need, and it is met first in the life and love of Christ.

The real question, then, is not about taxes but about allegiance. If we belong to God, what does that mean for the way we live in the world? Some people read this gospel as dividing life into two compartments: Caesar gets our public life, God gets our private faith.

But Jesus doesn't draw such a neat distinction. If our whole lives belong to God, then nothing in our lives falls outside the realm of the holy. This is not about whether church and state should be separate. It's about whether any part of our lives can be separate from God.

Our political choices reflect what we value, whose lives we believe matter, and what responsibilities we have to one another. They reveal whether we recognize the image of God in people whose lives and circumstances are very different from our own. Our values transcend the bounds of a political party or particular candidate. They are rooted in our baptismal covenant to seek and serve Christ in all people and respect the dignity of every human being.

Recognizing the image of God in another person does not mean we have to agree with them or excuse the harm they may cause. It means refusing to deny their humanity, even as we challenge their actions.

Because our deepest identity comes from God rather than from any government, political party, or social group, we are free to question authority, resist injustice, and love beyond the boundaries others construct.

That freedom is not a license to step back from public life. It is a call to enter it differently. In the weeks ahead, as the noise grows louder, we will be pressed to choose sides, condemn those who disagree with us, and fear the worst about the future. Jesus offers another way. Before we rush to judgment, we can ask: *Whose image is this?*

The answer never changes. The neighbor who votes differently bears the image of God. So does the undocumented stranger at the border, the person struggling with mental illness, and the person living with addiction. So do we, even on the days we feel least worthy and least sure where we belong.

Caesar may stamp his face on coins, but God has stamped God's own image on every human life, and no empire can claim what God has already claimed.

So give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Pay your taxes, cast your vote, take your part in the life of this nation. But give to God what is God's: your whole self, your deepest allegiance, your love for the neighbor in front of you. Remember whose you are. And remember that we belong to each other.

Amen.