ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

October 18, 2026 – PENTECOST 21 /PROPER 24, YR. A — The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: *"In God's Image*"

Isaiah 45:1-7	(There is no other God but the Lord, sovereign over all)
Psalm 96:1-9	(Our God is above all others in might, power, and glory)
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10	(St. Paul commends a young church's faith)
St. Matthew 22:15-22	(Jesus teaches: Give to God what is God's)

What kind of identity markers do you subscribe to? Think about it for a moment. We all have them. Some may display tattoos. Others may post bumper stickers on their cars. Some may subscribe to designer purses or clothes bearing trendy logos. Others may wear an engraved ID bracelet or don a team-based hat to signal belonging to a certain group or mission. If you belong to a club, that club might have a secret handshake. Some communities tell stories that signal the identities of their tribes or families through quilting; others produce distinctive kinds of artwork.

Orthodox Jewish men wear a phylactery on their arm, or a tallit prayer shawl out of deference to God. Early Christians indicated their belonging and identity by drawing the mark of a fish in the sand or carving it onto their homes and tombs. From earliest times, people have expressed themselves, their faith, their values, and their affiliations through metaphors and images.

And Scripture is filled with such illustrations. Jews were marked at Passover by spreading their doorframes with the blood of a lamb. Beginning with the first century A.D., Christian symbolic art flourished in churches and catacombs, and on sacred items such as chalices. Today, we still signal that we are Christians by wearing a cross around our neck or on our lapel.[1]

Such markers help us to confirm our identity, bond with others who believe or feel similarly, and to project our values and purpose to those around us. No matter how many words we use or books we read, we are people who respond primarily to *images*. All advertisers know this. Advertising uses images to entice us to purchase products that herald some prime or highly desired identity. "Buy this car and people will think you're smart and savvy"! "Buy these sneakers and you'll be cool as this famous athlete." "Buy these organic vegan foods to show you care about the treatment of animals," etc.

The enticements are endless! We are bombarded with so many messages in our culture, we can become confused about who we are and what we subscribe to. If we're not careful, we may flounder amidst the never ending sea of images constantly pressuring us through various electronic media. It's no wonder the Ten Commandments forbade "graven images" (Exodus 20:4-6) that would entice us away from God. Because whatever images you identify with most, those are the ones that will define you, and eventually not only signal—but also become—your foundational identity.

In today's Gospel lesson, the Pharisees and the Herodians—hoping to catch Jesus in an act of revolution or sedition—set out to entrap Him by asking whether or not it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. They figure that if He says, "Don't pay taxes to Caesar," He's in big trouble. And if Jesus says the taxes *should* be paid, then His Jewish followers will turn on Him for collaborating with the occupying power of Rome. As often happens, Jesus' response stuns them. He first asks to be shown the coin used for the tax. On the denarius is the image and title of Caesar.

Now, you need to know that the Jewish Temple authorities would not accept the denarius for payment of the Temple tax or for donation purposes. Only the Hebrew half-shekel was used for Temple tax, as the priests considered it unholy to accept currency with the image of the emperor on it within the Temple walls. Money needed to be properly exchanged in order for a donation to be made. This makes Jesus' answer even more wise and indisputable, as He replies: "See this coin? Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

In one fell swoop Jesus entirely flummoxed them. Speechless and unable to come up with a suitable comeback, his opponents departed. Why? Because Jesus had just effectively demonstrated the difference between economic and civic currency and human identity. A coin with Caesar's head on it could serve as material for one's civic duty.

But this is only currency. It has no hold on one's true identity as a child of God! As sons and daughters of God, the Spirit of God defines us, marks us, guides us, and claims us! That is our true identity, and no mere economic or earthly currency can challenge it or take it away from us! We are God's image etched and Spirit seared right down to our bones, because the Word of God tells us that each of us is "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14a) in God's image (Genesis 1:27). The emperor's image may be stamped on a perishable coin, but God's image is imprinted upon every human being whom God has destined for eternal life.

This gives Jesus' answer a significance that reaches far beyond the question of taxation. Yes, we have civic responsibilities. We live in communities, benefit from public services, and have obligations to our neighbors and to the common good. Jesus does not simply dismiss those responsibilities. Neither does He allow the claims of earthly authority to become absolute. Caesar may have a legitimate claim on a coin, but neither Caesar—nor any government or earthly power—owns our souls. Our ultimate identity and allegiance belong to God.[2]

That distinction is especially important in a world where political loyalties can become almost religious in their intensity. We can be tempted to place our deepest hopes in a political leader, a party, a nation, or an ideology. We can begin to believe that the right election, the right law, or the right person in power will finally make everything better. Of course, political decisions *matter.* Laws can protect the vulnerable or expose them to harm. Leaders can work for justice or undermine it. Christians should care deeply about the welfare of our communities and the decisions made in our names. But no political party is the Kingdom of God, and no earthly leader can take the place of Christ. When we give our ultimate loyalty to anything other than God, even something that begins with good intentions can become an idol. Beneath all our possessions, accomplishments, affiliations, and public identities, who are we? And to whom do we belong? These are the questions Jesus placed before the Pharisees that day long ago, and still asks us today.

He reminds us that we belong to God. Our worth is not determined by our bank accounts, our political influence, our social standing, or the opinions others hold of us. Our worth comes from the fact that we are created in God's image, loved by, and saved by God in Christ. And if we belong to God, then giving God what is God's involves far more than attending worship on Sundays or putting money in the offering plate. It means offering God our entire lives—giving God our hearts, our minds, our gifts, our time, and our decisions. It means asking whether our daily choices reflect the love of Christ. It means considering how we treat people who disagree with us, people who have little to offer us, and people whose needs interrupt our plans. It means remembering that the person across the political divide, the stranger who seems different from us, the neighbor who irritates us, and the person who has hurt us are also created in God's image. That does not mean we must agree with everyone or ignore wrongdoing. It does mean that we are called to treat others with dignity, to seek justice without hatred, and to speak the truth without surrendering our compassion.

There is a practical illustration of this in the ordinary business of daily life. Imagine a person who is unfailingly courteous at church, who speaks warmly about Christian love, but who treats a cashier impatiently, speaks maliciously about a neighbor, or dismisses someone who needs help. This person may have given God an hour of worship, but has the rest of the week been offered to God as well? The question is not whether we can divide our lives into religious and secular portions, giving God one part and keeping the rest for ourselves. The question is whether our faith shapes <u>all</u> that we think, say, and do. God does not merely ask for a place in our lives. The Lord calls us to live our entire lives in relationship with him.

So when Jesus says, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's," He is inviting us to examine our priorities. We may owe taxes to the state, responsibilities to our communities, and duties to our families and neighbors. But our deepest identity is not determined by any of these obligations. We are God's beloved people, bearing God's image and called to reflect God's love in the world.

Perhaps the most important question we can ask ourselves as we begin our Stewardship season here at St. John's Church, Compass, is not simply, "What do I owe?" but "What have I been given, and how am I using it for God?" Have I given God my patience when someone tests it? Have I given God my compassion when I encounter suffering? Have I given God my courage when speaking the truth is difficult? Have I given God my forgiveness when resentment would be easier? Have I given God my attention when someone needs to be heard? These are not questions we can answer perfectly. We are human, and we fall short. But each day offers us another opportunity to turn toward the Lord and to remember whose image we bear.

The coin belongs to Caesar. But we belong to God. And the God to whom we belong is not a distant ruler demanding tribute. God is the One who created us, knows us, loves us, and who gave Himself for us in Jesus Christ. May we therefore give to God not merely what is left over, not merely what is convenient, and not merely what we can spare, but our whole selves—our hearts, minds, hands, and lives, including our time, talents, and treasures. We are created in God's image, redeemed by Christ's merciful love, and called to bear that love to the world. Remember that, as you go forward this week, no matter what situations you may encounter. *Amen.*

[1] Adapt. Lori Wagner, "Made in the Image of God," n.d., Sermons.com <https://sermons.com/sermon/made-in-the-image-of-god/2241663> 13 October 2026. Used with permission.
[2] Adapt. C. H. Atgeepitee, "The Things that are God's," 12 October 2026 (personal communication).