October 18, 2026 – Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost – Matthew 22:15-22

Whose Image Is On You?: The Face on the Coin and the Image of God

Pull any coin out of your pocket or purse, if you have any on you. What's on the front? Unless it's a commemorative coin, it'll be the face of one of our past presidents, like on this dollar coin I have here.

It wasn't always this way. The first U.S. coin to have a real person's face was the wheat penny in 1909 featuring President Lincoln, struck to mark what would have been his 100th birthday. That was followed by Washington on the quarter and Jefferson on the nickel in the 1930s. FDR is the most notable, featured on the dime in 1946 shortly after his death to honor his legacy with the founding of the March of Dimes.

Before that our coins featured a stylized portrait depicting Lady Liberty in one form or another: Liberty walking, Liberty seated, Liberty with a winged cap. Even the famous Indian Head penny was Liberty wearing a Native American headdress. This was done on purpose. The founders wanted the thing stamped on our coins to be an idea, not a ruler. They had lived with British coins carrying the king's face and they didn't like what that came to mean. A face on a coin is a claim. It says whose realm this is and the longer you hold it, the more it starts to feel true.

That's what's going on in the Gospel reading for today. Someone is about to put a coin in Jesus' hand. And the face on it is not an idea. It is a man who thinks he's a god and has convinced the people to believe that.

Hold that coin in your hand a bit longer and let me ask you what Jesus asks, whose is this really?

Matthew's gospel today picks back up in the teachings of Jesus leading up to the crucifixion. The Pharisees are desperate to find some way to trap Jesus, so desperate that they're willing to work with the Herodians. You see, the Herodians were those working for King Herod, the puppet ruler who was aligned with the Roman Empire. The Pharisees on the other hand resented the Roman occupation and generally wanted nothing to do with the Empire. It's very rare that these two groups would ever join forces. But in this case, they shared one thing in common, their dislike of Jesus.

So they join forces and seek out Jesus to trap him in a question that no matter how he answers, one side will be upset. They start with what many could see as flattery. *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. Nothing they say is untrue. They don't mean a word they're saying, but it doesn't make it any less true. Jesus is sincere, does teach God's way, and doesn't defer to anyone. Which is exactly why this plan of theirs won't work. The irony is lost on them.

Then comes the gotcha question, *Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?* If Jesus answers yes, he would be seen as pro-Rome and the Pharisees could discredit him with the crowds being squeezed by the taxes. If he says no, then the Herodians could have everything they need to arrest him. Either answer will cost Jesus something, and that was by design.

Jesus doesn't take either option. Instead he responds to their question with a question of his own. *Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.*

Think about this request. Jesus doesn't have a coin on him to use for his example. He asks them for one. They hand him a denarius, a Roman coin. Notice where they are, in the temple courts. They just accused Jesus of being soft on Rome and are standing in the house of God with the Empire's money.

Seeing the coin, Jesus asks them, *Whose image is this and whose title?* Now, they know the answer without even having to look at the coin. The face was the emperor Tiberius and the inscription reads "Son of the divine Augustus." Son of a God, that was the claim stamped into the coin. It was not just money, it was a portable sermon about who was in charge of the world. I have to imagine the Pharisees and Herodians either confusedly or sheepishly answering, *Caesar's face.*

That was all Jesus needed. They said it themselves, the face on the coin tells them whose it actually is. So Jesus said, *Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's*. But he doesn't just leave it there, he adds something they weren't ready for. *And to God the things that are God's.* They were too stunned to try to turn it back on Jesus. The text just says they were amazed and walked away.

This is what I think Jesus was doing this whole time. The coin they handed to him has the emperor's face on it, so by virtue, the coin belongs to the empire. They can have it.

But I want to focus on the word that Matthew used for "image" when referring to the face on the coin. Eikon. The same word the Greek Old Testament uses in the creation story in Genesis when *God created humankind in his image.* That word

evolved into the English word "icon" which has become associated with images of Christ and the saints, whether as paintings, carvings, or stained glass. In the Orthodox tradition, the priest fills the sanctuary with incense to honor those icons and then turn to the people because they are icons as well.

When Jesus asked, *Whose image is this?*, he wasn't just pointing at the coin but also taking everyone there back to the very first pages of scripture. The empire put the emperor's face on the coin. God however put His likeness on people. On them. On you. On the person next to you. And yes, even the person you had an argument with this week. These imperial coins say "Look at me" while the image of God in each person points past us and to the One who made us.

We need to be careful here though, because saying we bear the image of God can turn into a sentimental, feel-good statement. It's not a compliment meant to make us feel better. It's a claim. It means we belong to someone. And if that's true, then no government, no party, no label, no loyalty test gets to lay claim to us. They might get our taxes. They might get our vote. But they don't get us.

Let's go back to the trap set for Jesus. Notice what he does and doesn't do. He doesn't say yes but he doesn't say no either. He looks at the question itself and tells them the premise is wrong.

We know that kind of question. Maybe we've been asked it in the past, or even recently. Which side are you on? Are you with us or against us? Say the right words, wear the right label, or you're out. Most of the time, somebody else designed that test, and they designed it so that every answer belongs to them.

As God's people we don't have to take the test on its own terms. That's not dodging. And it's not the church staying out of it, either. Caesar still gets his coin. We take part in the world we live in. But it doesn't own us.

So what does that mean for us?

It means we don't treat the world as if it's a terrible place or the enemy just because it's Caesar's. Paying what we owe, being a good citizen, showing up for others, that's how we love the neighbors God put around us. Giving Caesar what we owe him isn't a concession. It's part of how we care for others who also carry the image of God.

At the same time, it means we should be cautious of anything or anyone that wants to be the face we look at for everything. An idol says, "Look at me." An icon

says, “Look through me.” A lot of things in our lives are working hard to be idols. A party. A brand. A screen. A number, whether it’s a bank balance or how many people are in these pews. They ask for our attention, and then for our allegiance, and they’d like us to believe they’re the solution to all our problems.

This is the one I want us to sit with this week. If the image of God is on you, it’s on everybody else, too. The neighbor whose yard sign makes your blood pressure go up. The person on the other side of the argument at the diner. The person you’ve already decided you don’t have to listen to. They carry the same image you do. You don’t have to agree with them, and you may disagree sharply. But you can’t write off someone God has stamped with His image.

And finally, a word to us as a congregation. A small church in a small town can start to believe that the empire’s accounting is the only accounting. That a church only counts if it’s big, or noticeable, or well-funded, and that we don’t matter. But the image on us doesn’t shrink when the number of people around us does. Every one of you is an icon.

And here’s the good news, the image on us isn’t something we have to create ourselves. It was there during creation and in baptism we are reminded that we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ. A coin gets worn smooth and passed around but this mark doesn’t wear off. We don’t have to become God’s, we already are his.

Take the coin out of your pocket again. There’s a face on it, and the face tells you whose it is.

But remember how this story ends. Jesus asks his question, and they’re amazed, and they walk away. Nobody answers him. He leaves the real question hanging in the air, and it isn’t really about the coin.

It’s about whose image others see on us. Whose is on you?

Don’t answer that quickly. Carry it into this week, into the checkout line and the next argument you’re tempted to join and the table where someone you disagree with sits down across from you. Look at them, and look at yourself, and ask whose image you’re seeing.

Caesar can have the coin. God already has you.

And all of God’s people said, Amen!