

*Make Way for the Image of God*  
*The Art and Architecture of Faith, Part 6*

from the pulpit of  
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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Psalm 146

<sup>26</sup>Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”<sup>27</sup>So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

## Matthew 22:15-22

<sup>15</sup>Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” <sup>18</sup>But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? <sup>19</sup>Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. <sup>20</sup>Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” <sup>21</sup>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.” <sup>22</sup>When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

This has to be Jesus' best Stewardship Sermon. At this point in the gospel, Jesus is moving closer to the cross, when the Pharisees ask him a question about faith and paying taxes to the state. They are trying to get Jesus to say something heretical, making it easier for them to press charges against him. It is a trick question about the proper use of money, to which Jesus responds with a striking word play of contrasting of images.

In order to understand why this is Jesus' best Stewardship Sermon, it helps to remember a little local history. Since the year six of the Common Era, Judea has been under Roman rule. The Roman authorities collected a head tax from all adults, men and women, slave and free, between 12 and 65 years old. The tax is equally high for each person: one denarius. One denarius could buy eight loaves of bread or three nights in a tavern. According to Matthew, a farm worker earned a denarius for one full day of work. The head tax itself was not a big burden. But together with a whole range of other taxes it exhausted the country so that, at the time of Tiberius, Judea was begging for a reduction in taxes.

The most common denarius was a silver coin that pictured the Emperor Tiberius, crowned with laurel and said: Emperor Tiberius, Son of the divine Augustus. The other side read: Pontifex Maximus, Most High Priest, and depicted a divine throne occupied by the emperor's mother, Livia, personifying heavenly peace – a peace that was an irony for those who deeply resented Rome's military presence in Judea. Presenting the Emperor as a pagan priest and his parents as divine, the tax was an insult to Judaism's religious practices with its overt idolatry. The Zealots – who were more militantly religious than the Pharisees, refused to pay the tax declaring that they would be subordinate only to God. The Pharisees, although resentful, paid the tax.

The question then, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor?" was a hotly debated religious question and a dangerous political one. If Jesus answered, "No," the Pharisees could denounce him as a rebel Zealot. If he answered, "Yes," Jesus swept the hugely important theological question under the rug. So Jesus asked them to show him a denarius. He looked at the

image on the coin and said: “Give to the emperor the things that are his, and to God the things that are God's.”

The comparison of images for Jesus’ hearers is unmistakable. Everyone listening – knew exactly what Jesus meant, because they knew today’s Old Testament reading by heart: “God created humankind in God's own image, in the image of God, he created them, male and female, God created them.” This is why I consider this to be Jesus’ most powerful stewardship sermon.

Jesus enters the fray of a complicated theological debate, and clarifies the most important thing they should know from their own scriptures. That coin bearing the Emperor’s image, has nothing on you – Jesus reminds them, you, who are wondrously made in the image of God. Jesus helps them remember who they are, with the most basic lesson of stewardship: all that we have and all that we are belong to God. Life itself is pure gift; and we have been made in God’s own image; we bear God’s likeness, so that we can care for God’s creation.

This church has been truly blessed to have in our midst an amazing artist in Nena Bryans and several pieces of her sculpture. One – “Jesus Washing Peter’s Feet” hangs in the Chapel and the others in the Court of the Ministries Center – Doubting Thomas reaching to touch the Risen Christ, and Jesus stilling the storm in Nena’s “Even the Wind and Waves Obey Him.” Of all of her impressive works of art, each a beautiful interpretation of scripture, I will admit my favorite is “Make Way for the Image of God”, a gift of Dave Freeman’s family honoring their mother. It’s the largest of our sculptures in the Court with that marvelous angel, arms stretched up and out, leading a diverse parade of human beings forward.

Nena took her inspiration from Abraham Heschel, an American rabbi and leading Jewish philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his book, *Quest for God*, he tells the story of an ancient rabbi: Long ago, there was a Jewish school for young children. One day, in the middle of a lesson, a squadron of Roman soldiers, some on chariots and others in armor marched by the

schoolhouse. Each regiment carried a statue of a different Roman god and as it passed by a slave would cry out, “Make way! Make way for Apollo! Make way! Make way for Aphrodite!” The school children were wide-eyed, and their teacher seeing the powerful impression this display had made on his students said to them: My dear children, don’t you know that in front of every human being there is also a parade of a thousand angels and each angel cries out to all who pass by: Make way! Make way for the Image of God.”

And so Nena Bryans created Make Way for the Image of God, with a beautifully diverse assemblage of God’s own Image, on parade behind the angel. An African American couple at the front of the line. Did you know that at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Nena served as a Christian Educator for a church in Selma, Alabama? Behind the black couple is a girl licking an ice cream cone; a woman with a brief case, teenagers with their arms around each other, a man with a coat over his shoulder, a mother holding hands with her son and reaching back toward her daughter. Nena’s daughter Beth remembers posing for that one. An older couple, a little bit stooped over, bring up the rear of all these diverse images of God.

Now, I’ve long wondered why there is a dog in this beautiful parade. I love my dog, but Genesis says that God made human creatures in the image of God so that we could care for the earth and the animals. I went to visit Nena at Rosemont Presbyterian Village last week, and I made a point to ask her about the dog. It’s a Seeing Eye dog, she said. The man behind the dog is blind so he has a Guide Dog.

Black, white, young, old, male and female, sighted and blind, each one of us is made in the Image of God. Nena’s sculpture, you see, illustrates Jesus’ best Stewardship sermon. What we give to the church to support the work of God in the world – is grateful response for our lives that God has given us.

Abraham Heshel went on to write something else about Making Way for the Image of God that is a very important word for us to hear today: “The Divine likeness is something all humans share... reverence for God is shown in our reverence for humankind. The fear you must feel of offending or

hurting a human being must be as ultimate as your fear of God. An act of violence is an act of desecration. To be arrogant toward humanity is to be blasphemous toward God.” So when a journalist walks into an embassy and is tortured and killed and dismembered, that is a horribly violent act also against God.

When the clergy abuse scandal keeps showing up on the front page of the newspaper, the horror is inexplicably deep – the abuse, the cover-up, the damage done to innocent victims at the hands of those who were supposed to be trusted, but the other evil dimension is that the very people who should be affirming the image of God in everyone are themselves violating even that very image. And during the Dr. Ford and Judge Kavanaugh hearings, no matter your political persuasion, surely all of us can understand the uproar that situation raised, because sexual violence is so far-reaching.

The Center for Disease Control reports that one in three women and one in six men in this country have an experience of sexual assault. That means the CDC considers this a major disease of epidemic proportions. When it happens, it’s not just violence against a human being. It is that – and it is also a desecration of God’s image.

This is why the church spends so much of our resources trying to serve human persons in our service to God – providing food for the hungry, shelter for those marginally housed, books, libraries and tutoring for education, compassion for the violated, safety for the refugee, and Christian nurture for one another so we will never forget to see the image of God in any other human being or in ourselves.

As we prepare to make our annual stewardship pledges next week on Dedication Sunday, let us consider what “giving to God” means in light of this scripture. God does not ask us for some of our money or part of our time. God does not require of us a certain amount, although there is plenty of biblical material suggesting we give a tenth of our income to the work of the Lord. God doesn't even mandate an annual church-wide stewardship drive!

“Give to God the things that are God's,” Jesus says, and the things that are God's are our very selves. That is what we are called to give: us, our time, our talent, our lives, everything we are and everything we do to the glory of God.

As you prepare to fill out your pledge card between now and next Sunday, before you pull out the calculator and begin figuring out numbers and percentages and amounts... look in the mirror, and remember whose image you see; look into the eyes of someone you love and remember whose image you see; look into the face of someone in this community, or in the pictures of a world in need and remember whose image you see; think about everything you have that you value; and remember what Jesus said: “Give to God the things that are God’s.”

The amount of money raised for the work of the church will never be as important as our faithful response to Jesus’ best Stewardship sermon. Make way for the Image of God.

Amen.