Why do you test me, you hypocrites? Give back to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and give back to God the things that are God's."

As I was getting ready for today's homily, I found myself imagining what it must have been like to be a part of the crowd that was gathering around Jesus after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a Sunday, all that happening in the previous chapter to today's reading. Everybody shouting Hosanna at the top of their lungs, celebrating what most of them believed to be true, that this man Jesus was the son of David who was going to toss the Romans out of Jerusalem and restore the kingdom to the nation of Israel. Can you imagine with me how great that must have felt?

And then watching Jesus toss out the money lenders and the ones selling doves at exorbitant prices, the crowd had to be loving it. Even the kids were shouting out as well and everybody seemed to be celebrating. It felt like a new day dawning. I'm guessing they could hardly wait for what was going to happen next.

And they didn't have long to wait, because the very next day is the context for today's gospel reading.

The religious leaders and the Herodians, who were the ruling political power of the day, were NOT celebrating. Because they were concerned that if they didn't do something to undermine his popularity, Rome was going to look for someone else to keep a lid on things. So, they were ready to call Jesus out with a series of three questions intended to discredit him in the presence of the crowds or, failing that, try to cause him to make a misstep that would get him in trouble with the Romans…

Our Gospel lesson is the first of those three questions intended to do just that.

They started out with a bit of flattery. They thought that by acknowledging Jesus' special status, they could avoid alienating the listening crowd. "Rabbi, teacher," they asked, "we know you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one."

But then, they ask their well-rehearsed question, "Tell us therefore, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Now the tax in question was the poll tax or head tax, first imposed when Judea became a Roman province in 6 A.D and it created a revolt. There is no visible benefit associated with the poll tax for the people who paid it—it simply disappears into the emperor's coffers. DOES THAT REMIND YOU OF ANYONE? While the amount was not crushingly high, neither was it insignificant. A denarius was a day's pay for an ordinary worker—the equivalent of $100 today. When I left Pismo Beach to come back to Santa Barbara the other day, I had to pay $7 for a gallon of gas. Not insignificant!

The problem for Jesus, of course, is that the question had been carefully crafted to only allow for a yes-or-no answer. Their purpose in doing so was to force Jesus into saying the taxes are lawful, and that would alienate the people. But, if he answered that the taxes were not lawful,

the Romans would arrest him for sedition. Either way, Jesus loses and his enemies win.

But Jesus doesn't fall for the obvious ploy. He answers their question with a question of his own. With the crowd listening in, he asks, "Why do you test me, you hypocrites?" And then, he says, "show me the money (and everyone will see you hypocrisy)."

They brought him a denarius. Oops!! Even though the Torah forbids graven images? The religious leaders, questioning Jesus within the precincts of the temple, have no problem producing the offending coin with its graven image, presumably from their own pockets? THAT hypocrisy was not lost on the crowd. They immediately saw how the trap had backfired on the one's asking the question.

Jesus asks, "Whose is this image and inscription?" Not only is it the image of Caesar, the inscription says it all: "Tiberius Caesar, August son of the divine Augustus, high priest." Kind of like our coins saying, "In God we

Trust." Some things never change do they? The Romans were making a religious claim for the divinity of the state. Our coin also makes a religious claim by invoking God's support for the state, as though putting the words on a coin makes it so.

But then, Jesus pivots from the mundane question about taxes to the more provoking admonition, "And give back to God, the things that are God's." I think this is the main point that Jesus was trying to make. Sure he was having a little bit of fun putting the religious leaders in their place, but he was also reminding everyone that we are all the children of God. In effect, we are the COIN of God's kingdom, created in God's divine image, and Jesus is inviting us to respond to God's call to pick up our cross and make a difference in our troubled world.

Jesus's answer acknowledges our obligation to the state, but affirms our larger obligation to God. Coins bearing Caesar's image may belong to Caesar, but all things (coins, Caesar, Rome, the planet earth, the

universe itself) come from the mind of God. Caesar's realm is but a speck within God's realm. And, as history shows, the days of Caesar's realm are already numbered, but God's realm is eternal.

So, pretend with me, imagine as if you just heard those words, give back to God the things that are God's. What do you suppose those things might be? What was the first thing that crossed your mind when you heard those words?

What popped up for me almost immediately was Phil. 2:3, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty conceit but in humility regard others as better than yourself." That's a tall order for me because my ego really likes to be admired for the things I'm doing for God. And the only way to let go of my ego is to acknowledge with Thomas Merton in his beautiful prayer of humility, that the fact that I think I am following God's will does not mean I am actually doing so. And when I can actually let go of my ego, I feel a huge burden being lifted and I am free to just breathe and just be.

How about you? I asked a few of you to weigh in with your thoughts about things you are working on giving back to God.

Here's what some of you shared with me.

My friend Jay finds freedom from his ego in practicing random acts of kindness. For Jay, kindness isn't about table manners. It's a conscious act of moral courage, a refusal to let resentment have the final say. It's a commitment to go the extra mile for someone who needs a helping hand, and not give in to the temptation of indifference. Jay writes, "Perhaps that is why genuine kindness remains one of the most radical acts a believer can offer the world and give back to God."

For my friend Jim, it's being intentional about not avoiding social justice to protect the status quo but, imagining a world where everyone is treated with respect and dignity. It means taking a non-violent stand against those who ignore the unalienable rights of immigrants,

rights that were endowed to them by their Creator long before they crossed the border.

For my friend Caryl, it's remembering that we are all in this together, connected to each other and the world we live in.

I hope we can all renew our commitment this week to give back to God whatever stands in our way of bearing witness to the reality that we are all in this together as Elizabeth reminded us at our Fall kickoff dinner a couple of weeks ago, echoing for me what MLK said on March 22, 1964, "we must learn to live together as brothers (and sisters) or perish together as fools." My siblings in Christ, the choice is ours. . . yours and mine. Help us God to choose wisely!

Amen!