



Jesus doesn't carry cash or coins. Did you catch that detail? When these folks come to him with a tricky question about money, he wants to look at a piece of it, to hold it up as an illustration of the point he wants to make, but he doesn't have any on him. Doesn't dig in his wallet, or turn out his pockets, thinking he might. He automatically says, "Bring me a denarius and let me see it."

What if he'd needed it for something else, besides this object lesson? What if he'd gotten hungry or thirsty, and wanted to purchase a meal, a drink? What if the soles of his sandals wore out, and he needed to replace them? What if he came across someone else with no cash or coins, someone else with worn-out sandals, holding a piece of papyrus reading, "Anything helps. God bless"?

Earlier in Mark's Gospel, when Jesus is sending out the disciples for their ministries of healing and teaching, he tells them to only bring a walking staff—no extra clothes, no food, no money. They are to be entirely dependent on the hospitality and care of the people they meet along the way. Jesus not only doesn't participate in the same economy as those who bring this question to him, but he teaches his followers to opt out of that system, too.

He looks for and practices an alternative way of being in the world.

A couple I admire tried to not pay a portion of their taxes one year, decades ago. They have long held pacifist commitments and did the math to figure out what percentage of the money they paid to the government was going to support defense-building and war-making, and they didn't pay that amount. "We believe in libraries and public roads and other supports," they explain. "But we couldn't, in good conscience, pay for the same violence we work to eradicate in other ways."

They had heard of other people doing the same. They thought it might be a hassle, but went ahead with it, including a note explaining what they'd done and why.

It was the beginning of a twelve-year ordeal. Looking back, they moan, "We never imagined it would be so much work!" Phone calls, paperwork, threats of withholding, so many negotiations for what seemed, in truth, like a negligible dollar amount. They thought they were making a principled stand. They wouldn't do the same thing again, they say. "Our energy is just so much better spent on other ways of making peace."

These days, they pay their taxes—the full amount. They also ride bikes whenever and wherever they can. They grow and make much of their own food. They write books and songs about peacemaking and teach classes where they train community mediators of all ages. They have long-standing relationships with folks in other countries, traveling there to learn about peacemaking and share their own insights. They have found ways of devoting their lives to peacemaking, even if some of their dollars go to the opposite.

They wish they weren't contributing to the United States' weapons budget. They wish it weren't an obligation for people living in a society to fund that society's aggression. They wish the world were different. They are working to make it so. So they return a portion of their money to the system they live within, and they return their energy, their passion, their wisdom, their time, their devotion, to the call God has placed on their hearts to be peacemakers.

Once Jesus made his point, I wonder if he handed the denarius back to the person he'd borrowed it from. I wonder if that person put the coin back in their pocket, maybe rubbed the imprint of the face, the letters, between their finger and thumb as they considered Jesus' words. I wonder if they remembered Jesus' words the next time the tax collector came knocking, asking for what was Caesar's. Maybe giving it was easy then—just this coin. Maybe the person could hand it over, knowing they held on to their own self, their own soul; knowing they only offer the deepest and truest parts of who they are to the One in whose image they are made.

We participate in a world to which we sometimes make concessions. But we belong to the reign of God, which asks for our whole hearts, honoring and empowering our full selves.

Reflection Questions

1. What are some of the gifts you offer—to your friends and family, to your church and community, to God and God's kin(g)dom?
2. Reflect on a compromise you have made as part of a system you participate in. How did you discern what to do? How do you feel about that decision?
3. Have you ever "opted out" of an expectation? Why did you make that choice?
4. What are some ways you protect what is most important to you?
5. How might the church model or create alternative ways of being in the world?