

Sermon on “Bigger Barns”

There can hardly be any doubt that the issue of **the Bible and the economy** is an urgent issue for those who take the Bible seriously and, in some sense, as a normative script.

In the Old Testament, the Exodus experience is the basis for all that follows. Yet we often forget that the story of the Exodus is an economic story whereby Yahweh, the God of emancipation, freed Israel from the rapacious economy of greed of Pharaoh and through Moses led them into a covenant of neighborliness.

The covenant community of neighborliness established by Moses was intended to be a contrast to the economy of Pharaoh, where the few got rich off of the labor of the many. Instead of personal gain, the covenant community was based on the **common good** in which all were welcomed and where there were special provisions for the poor. The Deuteronomist states:

²¹When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the migrant, the orphan, and the widow. ²²Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this. Deut 24:21-22

And the observance of Sabbath and its subsequent provisions for the forgiveness of debt every seven years, and its restoration of land and wealth to the original families every jubilee year, was intended to ensure that there would be no permanent underclass in Israel ... debts were to be forgiven!

Yet Israel found this neighborly concern to be too burdensome to bear and begged for an end to the tribal confederation and longed for a king so that they could become like other nations. And indeed, they did so become, so that under King Solomon, Israel's economy and political life now took on the nature of Pharaoh's Egypt, where the few got rich off of the work of the many.

Throughout the monarchies of Judah and Israel which followed Solomon's reign, the prophets kept alive the covenant dream of neighborliness, calling Judah and Israel back to their roots.

Then in the New Testament, Jesus came and proclaimed in word and deed that very neighborliness found in the covenant. In doing so Jesus spoke often about money. In fact, Jesus spoke more often about money than any other subject except for the kingdom of God. You know the texts!

In Matthew Jesus said:

²⁴"No one can serve two masters: ... You cannot serve God and money. Matt 6:24

He also encouraged us to not be anxious, saying:

Therefore, do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed, your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Matt 6:31-33

And in the explanation of the parable of the Sower he says:

²²As for the seed sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but **the cares of the world and the lure of wealth** choke the word, and it yields nothing. Matt 13:22

In Mark...

we find perhaps the best-known caution of Jesus concerning wealth:

"Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." Mark 10:24b-25

That is where we also hear the story of the Widow's mite. (Mark 12:41-44)

However it is in the Gospel of Luke...

where we find that the issue of wealth and poverty permeates the entire Gospel. It begins with the Magnificat from Mary in the Luke's extended birth narrative where Mary sings:

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³**he has filled the hungry poor with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.** Luke 1:51-53

And in Jesus's inaugural address where he defines his mission, Jesus quotes Isaiah saying:

¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because **he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.** Luke 4:18

And in Luke's sermon on the plain, where his series of blessings are followed by a series of woes. Jesus first says:

"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God. Luke 6:20

Then a few verses later Jesus declares:

"But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation. Luke 6:24

In the beginning of today's gospel reading Jesus says:

"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Luke 12:15

Following our text for today, Luke's Jesus continues with this offering:

³³Sell your possessions, and give alms (to the poor). Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Luke 12:33-34

Later in his Gospel Luke's Jesus says to the rich man who desires eternal life:

"There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." ²³But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Luke 18:22-23

Lastly in Luke's gospel as Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and the cross, he encounters Zacchaeus, who when he has a change of heart declares:

"Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Luke 19:8

Some have argued that Luke intended Zacchaeus to be the norm for disciples when they have a change of heart.

So, I say again, there can hardly be any doubt that the issue of **the Bible and the economy** is an urgent issue for those who take the Bible seriously, and, in some sense, as a normative script. Thus Walter Brueggemann says in *Tenacious Solidarity*,

"The matter is made more acute when we consider the fact that the established Western church has, for the most part, learned to read the Bible apart from, or even over against economics; thus we have been schooled for a variety of reasons to read the Bible in categories that are individualistic, privatistic, other-worldly, and "spiritual." We have learned to fend off any reading of the Bible that takes seriously the *relentless materiality* of the Bible that is expressed in the doxologies of creation, in the prophetic oracles of judgement and hope, and in the narrative of Jesus ..." P 29

For example, when we pray the Lord's prayer, there is a decided effort to avoid Matthew's rendering of the text: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" preferring instead the more congenial, "forgive us our sins. I know there is a long ongoing debate over "debts," "sins," or "trespasses." But if you at all take seriously the roots of Old Testament faith grounded in Sabbath observance, along with its Sabbath year of debt release and the comprehensive remission of the Jubilee year, and Jesus own statement that he has come to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (or Jubilee), then one has to wonder if Jesus did not indeed mean financial debts. One theologian, Dr. Hendricks, Professor of Biblical Interpretation at New York Theological Seminary, puts an extremely thought-provoking slant on this concept. He suggests that Jesus was telling us to ask God to *release* us (**not** forgive us) from our debts **AS** we release others who owe us money. Prof. Hendricks is convinced Jesus truly was talking about **debts** here, about financial obligations meant to be repaid.

So let's look at our Gospel message for the day:

The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' ¹⁸Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' ²⁰But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'

If we were to translate this parable into a story about our contemporary society, what corporation, has not decided that the very best use of their surplus is to increase it size, its power, its control of market returns. And then justifies its actions as the only proper fiduciary action it could take. Never once, considering the common good or the needs of the poor.

On a more personable level, which of us, when we get a raise or unexpected income do not first think of our own financial status, our future retirement, or maybe even securing a wanted toy that we desired, instead of thinking of the common good, or the care of the poor. With the government stimulus checks most of us received, even though we may not have needed them, how many gave that income to a charitable cause?

If we really understand this parable, as we like to say, Jesus just went from preaching to medaling. Once again, quoting Brueggemann, from his recent book *Tenacious Solidarity*:

“We live in an economy of extraction. By “extraction” I mean policies and practices whereby wealth is extracted from vulnerable people and transferred to powerful people, so that that wealth can be incorporated into their surplus holdings. Such extraction, accomplished by the force of government and of corporations, is characteristically legal, even if destructive ... and I would say immoral.”

“... these matters are made more urgent when we consider the economic crisis in which we are now enveloped. It is a crisis that features the growing gap between haves and have-nots, the violence that finds people dispensable in the new technological economy, the exclusionary practices of globalism, and the readiness to savage the environment for the sake of more economic growth and productivity that serve the few. All of this has happened with the collusion and endorsement of the church that either wittingly or with witting timidity has remained silent as “neighborliness” has been squeezed out of a violent economy of commoditization in which everything and everyone has a price.” P.32-33

So what are we to do in the face of such an economy?

Shortly after the end of World War II, The Church of the Saviour in Washington DC, was founded by Cordon Cosby. This was one of the first non-denominational ecumenical faith communities in the U.S. The home page of their website begins with this statement of identity: **Church of the Saviour lives out its call to the inward/outward journey together in different communities. Each has a distinct charism and style, but all share the tradition of deep commitment, listening for God’s leading, and servant ministry in the nation’s capital.** One of their early communities was “The Ministry of Money,” now part of “The Dayspring Church.” It is a community that I have studied with and have counted as one of my richest blessings.

Elizabeth O’Connor, A staff member of Church of the Saviour at its founding, writes in *“Letters to Scattered Pilgrims:”*

“Filthy lucre,” as money if sometimes called, has been a favorite topic of conversation for us since the early days of The Church of the Saviour. We talk about it probably as much as Jesus did. When the founding members, young and poor, were forming themselves into a properly incorporated community of faith, they struggled for a discipline of membership that would help them and future members to deal concretely with at least some aspects of the handling of money. In its first writing the discipline read, “We commit ourselves to giving 10 percent of our gross income to the work of the church.”

“Their proposed constitution and disciplines were submitted to Reinhold Niebuhr, an eminent theologian of the last generation, who had agreed to read them and comment. His only comment concerned the discipline of money. “I would suggest,” Niebuhr said, “...that you commit yourself not to tithing but to proportionate giving, with tithing as an economic floor beneath which you will not go unless there are some compelling reasons.” *Letters to Scattered Pilgrims p. 6-7*

It is in a personal discipline in the use of money, based on proportionate giving with tithing as its floor, (shared by my wife), that Christ has set us free from the siren song of capitalism! In that discipline God has begun a new thing and fulfilled in us Ezekiel’s prophecy:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. Ezekiel 36:26

So today I ask you, "How big is your heart?" "Do you really need a bigger barn?"

Amen