

You That Have No Money, Come, Buy and Eat!
Sermon 3.17.2019 – Lenten Economic Equity series
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The rule of thumb for sermons is to stick to one point or to elaborate on one story. But I fear my message today will be a bit discursive because I am going to be talking about abundance, the abundance and rich food of God's love. And also because the scripture today links to so many other scripture passages about being fed, about the miracles of manna in the wilderness, and loaves and fishes. And because I am a theology student and a Bible nerd, I get excited at the abundance and cross-pollination of meaning. So I apologize in advance and hope that you will stick with me. But if I were to give one guidepost to today's message in Isaiah and my attempts to make various connections throughout the Bible, it would be this: God's economy is weird. Don't expect it to make sense. At least not in terms of the culture at large. God's economy is countercultural.

At the time that Isaiah preached this text, the children of Israel were in exile after the Babylonians had conquered their country and sacked their holy city. Isaiah tells them that Yahweh is preparing to lead them back into their own land after years of despair and hardship, and these are welcome words indeed: **“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”** After hunger and thirst, the prophet is telling them they will be filled, they will be satisfied. During the Lenten time

of fasting, this is an interesting choice for the lectionary, and for our exploration of Economic Equity.

God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts.

How can one buy food without money and without price? What if we could get all the food we need without money? Will that work in this world, in this economy? ***“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.”*** What is God telling us through Isaiah?

We know from last week's text about Jesus' temptation in the desert that “man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut. 8:3, Luke 4:4). Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, God is referred to as “the fountain of living water” (Jer. 17:13). And we know that Jesus says, “anyone who drinks the water I give them will never be thirsty” (John 4:14). Clearly Isaiah is referring to spiritual sustenance. Our experience of the Divine will feed our souls and our spirits. But what about putting worldly food on the table? How are we to deal with economic hardship and financial insecurity in the here and now?

Last week, Ben preached that if you are finding yourself barely making it on an individual level, remind yourself that you are not crazy, the system is crazy. Now I want to be careful with that term and not stigmatize those among us who face mental health challenges. These are loaded words. But I

am going to ask for your forgiveness and forbearance for a moment, and reframe these terms in a way not to exclude but to include. We all know that power of looking at an idea that does not make sense and saying, “that’s just crazy.” I could use another term, from the Latin, which is ‘insane,’ which simply means not healthy, as opposed to sane, which is healthy. It is true that some of the responses to a non-divine economy are definitely not what we would call healthy, and that’s the point. The point I want to make with a tender spirit is this: in an insane world, the sane people are going to look insane. The sane voices may very well sound insane to the culture at large. And that is a paradox. God’s ways and God’s thought will often look paradoxical to us. So we are not going to not going to use the words ‘crazy’ or ‘insane’ any further. But we can certainly use the word paradoxical or countercultural. And God’s economy is countercultural.

There are many passages in the gospels that address the question of how to get along in an economy of empire. The obvious one that comes to mind is when Jesus looks at a coin and says, “render unto Caesar what is due Caesar, and render unto God what is due God.” Different economies. Frequently we interpret that teaching as learning to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. We have to adapt a mindset that W.E.B. Dubois called “double consciousness”, of keeping one’s feet grounded solidly on the earth, but one’s mind and spirit pointed toward God as much as possible. Dubois was describing what it was like to live as a Black minority under white supremacy, and the bilingual-ness that he was talking about is not

exactly the same as what I am trying to describe, but the mechanism is similar. And similar to what Dubois is describing, we are at a point of moving from not merely learning how to get along in a system of empire, but dismantling that system. Glennon Doyle, blogger and activist, uses the quote, “You can only pull people out of the river for so long until you have to look upriver to find out who’s pushing them in.” We are being asked, ***Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?*** We are being asked to align ourselves with God’s economy, and that, for the time being, is countercultural.

I like to look to the early church to see the first examples of how our spiritual ancestors worked to live in community under empire. In the early church, as Paul tells us, some people had many resources, some had few resources, some had nothing, and everyone got fed. Those were the rules. Later on, some groups lived together in households and kept their property in common. They were communalists, which sounds very similar to another term that starts with a ‘C’ that we are not supposed to use when describing the church. The early Christians were oddballs. When they wouldn’t stop talking all their messianic talk about Jesus, they got kicked out of the synagogues for being too weird. Their belief in Jesus went against cultural norms in terms of their Jewish origins and certainly clashed with the dominant power of Roman occupation. But their economic arrangements went against the grain as well. In the early centuries, when they formed small groups and held church in peoples’ houses, Christians developed a reputation for performing acts of charity, and not just for other Christian

members of their in-group. This was not the norm for Roman society, where the poor and hungry were frequently left to starve, and care was generally given only to one's family or immediate household. If this ethic of care was countercultural, it came out of a teaching that was also countercultural: love your enemies. Why would anyone want to do that? Isn't that counterintuitive in terms of survival?

When God says, Come, **'buy wine and milk without money and without price,'** we know God is speaking in paradox. The things of true value do not have a price and cannot be bought with money. God's language is paradox. If you are looking at a paradox, look for the Divine in it, and see if you don't find God's handwriting. The teachings of the scripture are filled with paradox. In Jesus, God became human, and the human was also Divine. The Prince of Peace was born as a helpless infant, to a poor family in a persecuted tribe, living under military occupation. The one that saves her life will lose it, and she that loses her life will save it. The first will be last and the last will be first. The rich will be sent away empty and the poor will have their fill. Blessed are the humble, for they shall inherit the earth. All of these ideas are counterintuitive and countercultural. **God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts.**

In a world that is based on competition, in a zero-sum economy where having winners means that there must inevitably be losers, choosing cooperation doesn't make sense, it's a loser's move. I think of the story from a Native American tribe where a missionary teacher was trying to

goad and inspire her pupils to work faster on their math problem. “Hurry up,” she says to one student, “Johnny is going to catch up with you!” “Well,” says the young Indian student, to her confusion, “then let’s sit down and wait for him.” It makes me think of a certain American president and failed business executive who would call those kids losers. God’s economy is countercultural in a culture that has gone haywire in putting profits ahead of human lives. God’s ways are not our ways, and we have to be willing to learn to look for them against the grain of what we hear, the civil religion.

God’s economy is an economy of sharing that does not divide. The simplest example of this is light. If I light my candle, and I share that flame with you, then we both have light, and the light isn’t divided or diminished. In fact, it grows in brightness. It’s a concept that is simple enough that we can use it to teach children about love, and to remind the grownups that that’s how love works. There’s a reason we enact this in our services of worship. As we say in theology geek speak, the liturgy IS the message. That is God’s economy. Knowledge works the same way: you share your knowledge with me and then we both have it. Hope works that way too. These are the things we must give away freely if we want them to grow in us. We have to behave counter to an economy of scarcity and fear to enact justice, and to value the things that don’t make sense to a scarcity mindset: Reciprocity. Mutual dependence. Receiving, with trust of our worthiness, and then paying it forward without the hope of reward. Taking time to pray, to

contemplate, and to care for our souls instead of being ‘productive’ every minute of the day.

If we are called upon to translate God’s economy into the not-healthy economy of empire, we are called upon to be weird and countercultural, and yes, crazy to some. We may be labelled hippies and communists and dreamers. We have to be willing to be weird for God, and for each other, weird and unafraid. “Fear not” is the most repeated imperative in both testaments of scripture. Being unafraid is a tall order in frightening times, but Jesus’ time was very frightening as well, and the disciples did God’s work nonetheless, in their flawed, imperfect selves. Like them, we are not meant to do it alone. We are meant to do it together. Even when Jesus sent out his disciples with no extra food or an extra cloak to spread the Good News, he sent them in twos. When they received the Great Commission to spread the Good News, they received it together. When they received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they received it together. When you feel afraid, remember that you are not alone, because we are all in this together and God is always with us. And when you step out in countercultural faith and you are afraid you might be crazy, fear not. Talk with one of us who is also crazy, and we will step out together.

In God’s economy of grace, love cannot be earned. In our unhealthy economy mindset, we are knocking ourselves out trying to win God’s love on the proving ground, as if we’re in a competition, on our own merits. God offers us a different vision, one where we are worthy simply because God

loves us. It is not a competition, because we have already won whatever we need. We are the beloved in whom God is well pleased. The sum is not zero. The sum is God's love, and there is always enough. **For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.**

Amen.

Benediction (*allusion to Isaiah 55:11*)¹

We have experienced Gods' mercy.
We have been filled by God's Word.
We know the steadfastness of God's love.
So, now let the words that go out from our mouths
and the deeds that are lived by our hands return to this sanctuary,
not empty but accomplishing God's purpose,
succeeding in the things for which God sends us into the world.

Our worship is ended – let our service begin.

¹ Come All Who are Thirsty: Service Prayers for the Third Sunday of Lent was written by the Rev. Dr. David Bahr, pastor of Park Hill Congregational United Church of Christ in Denver, Colorado. Copyright 2019 Justice and Local Church Ministries, Faith INFO Ministry Team, Cleveland, OH.