

## The Economics of Jesus

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Ezekiel 34:15-23  
Matthew 20:1-16

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A couple of years ago, the New York Times reported that a group of day laborers standing on the corner of Broadway and 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Queens were confronted by police who arrested ten of them for blocking the sidewalk. Groups of workers had been standing at this location for several years without interference, waiting to be picked up by prospective employers to work on construction, landscaping, or a home improvement project. Most of the workers at this site were Latino, and many were undocumented. After the ten arrested men were taken away, the Times reporter interviewed a diminutive Mexican woman pushing a 2-year-old boy in a stroller who had appeared at the intersection, tears dampening her cheeks. He writes:

*She said her husband was one of those arrested. He had called her on his cellphone as the police started asking the men for identification... the woman, who gave only her first name, Olivia, said that both she and her husband were in the country illegally and had four children, all of whom had been born in the United States. She said she was afraid that her husband was going to be deported.*

*"He's the one who works," Olivia said, sobbing. "Who's going to support the four children now?" (New York Times, October 21, 2008)*

Finding a job during hard times can be risky business if you are a day laborer. About two thousand years ago, Jesus told a parable about a similar group of workers. During the occupation by Rome, a wealthy vineyard owner goes out to a streetcorner in the marketplace to find laborers for the day. As in modern times, these laborers would probably be the poorest of the poor. The vineyard owner needs workers, and he picks up several very early in the morning, then goes back to get other workers at later points during the day, even late into the afternoon. At the end of the day, the last to be hired are paid first, and each worker gets the same wage, one denarius, a minimum wage for a day's work.

The first laborers to be hired grumble and protest, but the vineyard owner reminds them that he has upheld their original agreement. He says, 'I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go... Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? (vs. 14-16)''.

Bernard Brandon Scott, a veteran scholar of the parables, believes that Jesus uses these teachings to help his followers re-imagine the world, and this re-imagined world is called the kingdom of God. It is a worldview that contrasts sharply with the real world of hierarchy and colonial imperialism, and it is both liberating and terrifying.

Scott sees the parable of the vineyard laborers as depicting the radical equality of the kingdom of God. We must treat others with equality, because God treats us in this way. But for those who feel a sense of injustice and entitlement, the idea of distributive economics sticks in the craw. The complaint against the owner in the parable by those first hired is that he has made all the workers equal.

Jesus ends the parable with the words, "So the last shall be first, and the first shall be last." Jesus sees the realm of God as one which eliminates hierarchy and puts everyone on the same level. We see this throughout his teachings. The leveling effect is particularly present in the parable we read last week, the story of the rich man who throws a dinner party and must invite the homeless,

denied the company of those rich like himself. The leveling effect is also seen in the parable of the shrewd manager, or the story of the rich farmer who can't take his barns and surplus goods with him when he dies. We'll talk about that one next week. Death is the great equalizer.

Jesus advises a rich young man to sell all he has in order to have eternal life, and the man shakes his head sadly and turns away. The young man had done nothing wrong; he obeyed the laws of the Torah and somehow had accumulated great wealth and many possessions. But, he missed the point of God's extravagant generosity. And, he didn't seem to understand his own complicity in an economic system which rewarded those who already had wealth and burdened those who had little.

The past two years have been marked by increasing financial anxiety in U.S. and global markets, at the bank, grocery store check-out, and on the job, where lay-offs have resulted in record numbers of workers who are unemployed. We have all been forced to learn more about our current economic system, becoming more familiar with terms like *depression*, *recession*, *inflation*, and *deflation*.

Julie Polter, an associate editor of *Sojourners* magazine, writes about the emotional upheaval that has accompanied the chaos in the financial world:

*Some of us feel great fear as retirement funds nosedive or house values plummet, those ephemeral numbers on computer screens or in newspapers creating real uncertainty about our future. Others are caught in the undertow of the mortgage crisis or of personal debt, losing homes and cars and more. Others only know that they seem to be working harder, but getting poorer. (Polter, *Sojourners Magazine*, May 2008).*

I was at the grocery store the other day and saw an older woman in the parking lot. As I was leaving with my purchases, she was just arriving, not to shop, but to work a shift as a grocery bagger. She shut the door of an ancient car that looked like it might not start up again, and then walked across the asphalt, limping slightly. I wondered about her life. What was her story? She was obviously old enough for retirement, but she must need that menial job at the grocery store in order to make ends meet. She didn't look up to standing on her feet all day. Was she strapped by health care or prescription costs? Did she have to support others who needed her income? Was she about to lose her home?

I realized that although these economic times are anxious ones for many of us, my own worries are drastically different than those of people who are struggling just to survive. The chasm between the rich and the poor is growing wider, but this gap is not part of Jesus' economics. Jesus' economics were based on his view of the realm of the God.

The realm of God is not a grand future event; it is a present, active force in the lives of the humans and creatures God loves. "The kingdom of Heaven is among you," says Jesus (Luke 17:21). It is where we feel an interior, spiritual force urging us to work for a society where all have enough and everyone receives an adequate wage, a society where the burden of unfair debt is eliminated, the practice of forgiveness is corporate as well as personal, and there is safety, freedom, and joy for all people. The realm of God is a Great Economy, one that takes the welfare of earth as its ultimate goal, not an industrial economy that focuses on profit for a few.

And so, we should reflect on our place in this beautifully organic, egalitarian, and economically subversive realm that is here within and among us. Perhaps we can best think of this realm of

God as a household, with the whole inhabited earth being the place where God's family lives and works. The Greek word, *oikos*, literally means household, and it is the root for our words, *economy*, *ecology*, and *ecumenical*.

Our economy, from the Greek, *oikos-nomos*, "rules of the house", has misplaced priorities. It seems to have forgotten that the family in the house is the heart of its work, not stock markets, gross national products, and financial indicators. And ecology, from the Greek, *oikos-logos*, or "the study of the house", is not separate from economy but should be part of the great work that keeps earth's household healthy and flourishing.

What should the ecology of God or the economics of Jesus look like in today's world? Theologian Ched Myers describes Jesus' economics as Sabbath economics. It involves give and take: the graceful receiving of what God (the employer in Jesus' parable) gives us and our responsibility not to take more than what we need. Myers uses the manna story in Exodus to illustrate this point. The people of Israel were fed by God in the wilderness as they fled oppression in Egypt. Nutritious bread dropped from the heavens like snow each morning. But God told the people only to take just enough of the gift for the day and that hoarding it would make it rot. What practices in our current extractive economy cause us to take more than we need, leaving some with valuable resources rotting in landfills, and others with not enough to survive?

Sabbath economics are the economics of Jesus. It is the Great Economy whose goal is the common good of all members of earth's household. What does this mean for our own money and faith habits?

Well, like the Rich Young Ruler who comes to Jesus because he wants to know how to live a truly good life and attain heaven, we often don't like the answers Jesus gives us. The Rich Young Ruler went away sorrowfully, because Jesus intuited that he loved his money too much. Jesus asked him to give it away to the poor, and this was something he couldn't bring himself to do. Redistributing his great wealth went against his sense of entitlement. And so, he walked sorrowfully away from Jesus, having heard an answer that he couldn't live with. His money was making him spiritually sick. Jesus knew that in order to become truly whole and healthy, he had to give it up. The Rich Young Man just couldn't do it.

Do you know the story of John D. Rockefeller? Rockefeller was a millionaire by the age of 23. He was the richest man in the world by age 50. In his 53<sup>rd</sup> year, he became sick with an illness that no physician could identify. His hair and eyelashes fell out. The only thing he could eat was milk and crackers. He couldn't sleep. His body dried up. He shrank until he looked like a mummy. And, at the beginning of his 54<sup>th</sup> year, three of the best physicians in the world told him he had less than a year to live.

But very early one morning, as the richest man in the world tossed and turned through another sleepless night, Jesus' words about laying up treasures on earth came to him with a power and message he'd never felt before. The economics of Jesus dawned upon him. Five hours later, John D. Rockefeller climbed out of bed with a new direction for his life. He was now determined, over whatever time might remain to him, to work as hard at giving his money away as he'd previously worked at making it.

Someone has estimated that 500 million people are alive today because of the cures for malaria, diphtheria, and tuberculosis, as well as the discovery of penicillin, which Rockefeller research

grants made possible. And this is only a fraction of the philanthropy accomplished by Rockefeller.

And what of Rockefeller himself? Six months after his declaration to change his life, he reported to his amazed physicians that he had never felt better. All of the terrible symptoms which led them to conclude he was dying had disappeared. He lived another 44 years, mostly in excellent health, and died in 1937 at the age of 98.

Does anyone doubt that his sickness was indeed spiritual, and that both his illness and his cure were related to his use of money?

"Well, yeah," you say, "but we're not Rockefellers". That's true enough, but we may still be like the farmer, the farmer who looked across the beauty of his farm and pasture land and up into the skies. He was moved to pray, 'O God, you are a great God! Why I wish I had \$1,000,000. I'd give it all to you Lord."

A voice from the sky booms, "How 'bout a cow?"

To which the farmer retorts, "Now, hold on there a minute Lord! You *know* I have a cow."

Like the farmer and the Rich Young Ruler, we find it hard to give up the wealth that is personal to us. But Jesus is asking us to find ways to give more of ourselves than is comfortable, because there are many of God's children who are never comfortable.

We must examine our lives and see how we might implement practices of sharing and sustainability. We should look at our investments and savings and see what might be done to make more of that capital available for community development or social change. We should take steps to lower our household debt level. And, we should consider thoughtful philanthropy, lifestyle changes that honor the environment, building relationships with people who are marginalized, and honoring the commandment to observe the Sabbath by balancing work with rest.

Making good lifestyle choices is one way that we try to be better disciples of Jesus' economics. But we also have the responsibility as citizens to speak out for systemic changes, as well. Our current practices of unrestrained capitalism and unlimited consumption simply cannot be sustained. Those of us who benefit from this system are like the fat, strong sheep in the reading from Ezekiel. We push the sick ones aside, and butt the weak ones away from the flock.

But God cares about these weak ones and condemns the selfish actions of those sheep who greedily consume all they can. Verses 18-19 of Ezekiel 34 should be a warning to all of us who live in middle-class America. God says to the strong sheep, "Some of you are not satisfied with eating the best grass; you even trample down what you don't eat! You drink the clear water and muddy what you don't drink! My other sheep have to eat the grass you trample down and drink the water you muddy."

If we believe in a theology of abundance, that God really has provided all of us on earth with everything we need, then we should be deeply grateful. We are grateful for what we have received of the fruits of the earth. And accompanying this gratitude is responsibility. We are reminded of the gifts we must make to others, whether through our philanthropy, our service, or investing our money in ways that help the poor and protect the environment.

This is what it means to be part of the economy of Jesus. It is the give and take of life in the Kingdom of God and in the household of earth. May we remember the house rules!