Proclaiming the Lord's Favor: Preaching on Economics in an Election Year

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American voters, faced with a shaky economy, declining public services, and a safety net full of holes, deserve political candidates willing to confront the hard realities of unforeseen security costs, tax laws that favor the rich, and mounting deficits. The hardest reality of all, however, may be that candidates who "tell it like it is" are unlikely to be elected, and therefore, most remain silent, unwilling to challenge voter apathy and the economic delusions fostered by late-night radio harangues. The preacher also finds it difficult to "tell it like it is" when preaching the gospel in this time of economic uncertainty and transition. It is not easy to preach good news to the poor (Luke 4:18) to a congregation in which middle class people are anxious about falling out of the middle class because of the loss of jobs, health insurance, and pensions on which they had staked their future.

After the Advent and Christmas readings of the birth narratives and the baptism announce that Luke's narrative will point to a strange evangelical political economy, we are introduced on the third Sunday after Epiphany to Rabbi Jesus preaching in the synagogue (Luke 4:14-21). He finds the place in the scroll handed to him where the prophet Isaiah declares the anointing of the Spirit and the authorization of ministry to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and the proclamation of the year of the Lord's favor. Then in the shortest sermon on record, Jesus declares this prophecy is being fulfilled in their hearing. It seems fairly simple and straightforward until we realize that what the prophet Isaiah is talking about is linked directly to a complex economic system described in the Leviticus holiness code.

The Torah in Leviticus, widely misunderstood and sometimes rejected by modern Christians, is God's gift that makes life in a humane household or economy possible. The economy codes that spring from the Torah are meant to preserve the political and economic equality that Yahweh intends to create as deliverer of Israel from the slave economy of Egypt. Concern for the poor in God's law is not rooted in a mere longing for order; the defense of the poor is rooted in theology, that is, in an understanding of who God is and how God acts for the life of all. God's motive is made clear through the legal codes. Yahweh liberated the people when they were aliens and oppressed; therefore, Yahweh's redeemed people should show the same compassion toward the poor in their midst. God's economy is based on and embodies God's own gracious suffering love.[1]

Living in God's economy of grace today still means living in obedience to God's way of distributing righteousness. Living in the resurrection household of Jesus carries with it the expectation that we learn in covenant faithfulness what God requires in the distribution of what it takes for everyone in the household to live. Christians work for a just economy because God's people have been redeemed—an economic term in the Bible—and it is therefore intolerable for them to live in a society where access to food, shelter, clothing, medical care, safety, and education is not universally accessible. God's redeemed people are offended that God's law regarding charging interest is disregarded (Lev 25:35-38), resulting for our society in the enslavement of many to credit card and other debts, and on a world-wide scale, in the institutionally sanctioned oppression of debtor nations. Even the archaic-sounding law regarding gleaning (Lev 19:9) calls into question the economic assumptions of our culture. How is it possible to live with a system that allows CEOs of bankrupt companies to reap to the edge of the field, scooping up their bonuses and golden parachutes and leaving nothing for the minimum-wage mailroom worker to glean? In God's law, the amassing of wealth cannot be justified when it flies in the face of the poor, who are excluded from what gives them life and future.

The earth itself cries out for our observance of God's Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25:3-5, 23-24). Our stewardship of the land, the sky, and the sea comes from our understanding of God's intention to redeem the earth and all creation. We live in the hope "that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). The economic questions we should be asking candidates in this election year take on new significance when we preach on economy as a matter of God's salvation, a sign of holiness and righteousness, a vocation to live out of God's own economic work begun in creation and continued in the sending and future of the risen crucified Jesus. When we preach on economics, we are preaching on God's intention that all creation have what is necessary for abundant life.

In an election year, we who belong to the "Bread of Life" should start by asking ourselves why it is that our rich nation still has hunger, still has 43 million people without health insurance, still has inadequate housing for the working poor, still puts educating our children at the bottom of our budget priorities. Why is it that we are supposed to rejoice over an "economic recovery" that is known to be "jobless"? What is it about our economic policies that marginalizes some segments of society and denies access to basic needs of life to the nation's poor?

We encounter daily the complexities of a modern global economy, and the general public is perplexed. We are encouraged to be proud of our nation's heritage, including its capitalism, and yet few of us understand the changes that have taken place in recent years. Globalization is touted as "good" for America by one side in this election, "bad" by the other. Both sides may agree that globalization in one form or another is inevitable, but neither side does much to make the implications of globalization for our own economy and for the developing countries clear to our voters.

Globalization can be understood principally as the spread of the market system's domain or the ideology of free markets writ large. Its proponents view it as the "new economy" or the "second great age of capitalism." Global market fundamentalist ideology maintains a simple equation: Privatization plus deregulation plus globalization equals global integration by the market system equals prosperity. The economic integration of the world through "free trade" promises lasting affluence and peace.

But the results of the current globalization, not unlike the first globalization (1870-1929), do not support this fundamentalist utopianism. Everywhere it reaches, intense globalization generates massive wealth by closing inefficient firms and sectors of the economy. Destroyed in the process, however, are secure jobs. While millions lose their livelihoods, the architects and beneficiaries of global change are enriched at a rate and scale never before seen. Economic efficiency increases but so do societal inefficiencies. Globalization does not work for most of the world's abject poor and working poor. They have felt increasingly subject to forces beyond their control.

In other words, the free market economy we have depended on and looked to for our livelihood can be a threat to the life of the community when the government abdicates its responsibility to prevent abuses of the market's freedom. The global market system, left to its processes of deregulation and privatization, can become inhuman and inhumane. The candidates we elect and the government they represent need to understand the strengths of the market as well as its weaknesses. We need to ask candidates how they would bring the human into the market and how they would help the market become a tool for the enhancement of the *whole* community.

In the midst of this global surge of wealth for a small number of individuals, peoples and nations—ours included—have become poorer. The United States is in severe debt. We have gone from being the largest creditor nation in the world in 1989 to being the largest debtor nation in the world in 2004. The size of the national debt makes the unthinkable—the economic collapse of our country—possible. The fact that it's "all on paper," the fact that various agencies come up with varying figures, doesn't matter. We are dangerously in debt, and we are already feeling the effects on human beings in the dismantling of the welfare state. Welfare reform is no longer working. Affordable housing is disappearing. The welfare to jobs program cannot function if there are no more jobs and job-training programs are shut down. Medicare, Medicaid, and health programs for children and the "uninsurable" endure major cutbacks. Money that would be spent on programs for the poor is now spent on national security, though few feel more secure.

According to the scriptures, and the best of the American democratic memory, a nation cannot long stand that is divided by vast discrepancies in income and wealth. The gap continues to widen according to Census Bureau figures released in late September 2003:

> The official poverty figure rose from 11.7 percent of the population in 2001 to 12.1 percent in 2002, bringing the total of those living below the poverty line to 34.6 million. Per capita income declined by 1.8 percent in 2002 to $22,794—the first yearly decline since 1991. In another set of tabulations, the Census Bureau said that for the second year in a row rising unemployment and increasing health care costs caused the biggest jump in a decade in the number of Americans without health insurance. Those without coverage rose to 43.6 million, or 15.2 percent—up from 14.6 percent the previous year.[2]

We are left in this election year with the question of the poor. Being human for God's people means being a participant in a household or an economy, Israel or the body of Jesus Christ, that exists to serve God's creation of the conditions of home for all of God's creatures. God's power over death, sin, and evil is God's power to create the conditions of home for all creatures God has called into being.

From the Christian perspective, all things are held together ("systematized," Col

1:17) in the crucified risen Jesus, the Son of Israel's God and the embodiment of the "economy of grace." The human being as created in the *imago trinitatis* is meant to live in an economy of common loves upheld by trust in God's promise and praise for God's faithfulness aimed at a new *polis*. In this *oikonomia* God offers Godself in a risky form of vulnerable humanity and correspondingly the church seeks to overcome the unilateral and invulnerable power of the world that God renounces in the history of Israel and Jesus. The practices shaped by Word and sacrament are the means by which God creates homemakers, that is, "economists" or "disciples." The mandate of economy is bringing everyone in the household into the relations that serve life rather than death. The *oikonomia tou theou* must be thought of initially in the most concrete terms imaginable: hunger in relation to table and bread.

The problem for preachers, then, is how to bring the realities of today's global economy into focus in light of God's intention for a community of abundant life. For a variety of reasons, preaching during Lent offers remarkable opportunities to hold our society's economic assumptions in contrast to God's promise of an alternative economy of grace.

Preaching in Lent: A Return to God's Economy

Each of us comes face to face in Lent with the reality of our finitude and mortality: the scarcity of time, energy, and life. There is never enough time, never enough energy, never enough life, and we are anxious. This sense of lack, television commercials tell us, can be assuaged only by buying, possessing, accumulating, and consuming. But this is the form of life that leads to death because it precludes the trusting in the gospel. A community that functions on these senses of scarcity and anxiety is already a community in love with death.

Lent's focus on death, then, is not centered on individual mortality alone; the life of all creation is at stake. Lent prepares us for the gift of new life in the community of faith that arises from Jesus' act of love in his death and resurrection. Taking up our cross means first recognizing that God's economy, God's way of redeeming the creation, is found in God's self-giving cross of Christ. Taking up our cross then leads to our taking on Jesus' mission to confront the powers that rob us of life: terror and tyranny, corruption and greed, neglect of the earth, and all the forces that prevent God's people from living life in its fullest. From the perspective of Lent, we remember that God sent Jesus, not to save only a few good people, but to save the whole world. The economy of God is grounded in God's destruction of death in Jesus and God's promise of the ultimate destruction of death in the whole creation. Our preaching on economy thus will reflect our concern for the world and our interconnectedness with all creation. The wealth of the few and the poverty of many is not a sign of a healthy economy but a sign of coming danger for all.

Our observance of Lent reminds us again of our desperate hunger for God's new creation. Lent begins with fasting, with the retelling of the story of Jesus' forty-day fast in the wilderness. Fasting for Christians today should be a spiritual exercise that is at once an expression of solidarity with the hunger of the world. The Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Lent begins with Jesus' giving the tempter a history lesson about God and bread (Luke 4:1-14). In the first temptation a hungry Jesus rejects the devil's offer of an economic miracle. Turning stone into bread would be yet another economic trick not unlike our widespread superstitious trust in the market to solve all human problems. Market solutions taken by themselves often make things worse because they do not recognize that the things most necessary for making life human are gifts and not commodities to be bought and sold. Jesus responds to the tempter by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, the interpretation of the manna: "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Only the bread that comes with God's justice will satisfy hunger and bring life by increasing hunger for righteousness.

The Third Sunday in Lent continues the discourse on bread with the reading from Isaiah 55:1-9, and our attention is drawn to the meaning of bread:

> Ho, everyone who thirsts,
> come to the waters;
> and you that have no money,
> come, buy and eat! (v. 1)

God's gift of manna, as Jesus reminded the tempter, and the food Isaiah sees as a gift, obtained without the expected agency of exchange, both point to God's remarkable method of distribution. God is the Righteous One who gives bread for life in just distribution. How shall God's bread be distributed? According to the logic of gifting, or, as the Hebrew people learned in the wilderness, according to what each needed for life: "The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed" (Ex 16:17-18).

The manna was true gift, used but not used up, because when more was needed more was available. When bread is treated exclusively as a commodity, needs are not met, hunger appears, and death threatens as soon as there is no more money to buy bread. The gift, on the other hand, is passed along and remains plentiful. A gift multiplies, as Jesus shows with the astonishing abundance of wine at the wedding feast in Cana (John 2:1-11) and the twelve basketfuls leftover after the feeding of the five thousand (Luke 9:12-17). Gifts produce surplus not deficit. Gifts that remain gifts can support an affluence of satisfaction, even without numerical plenty. Those who share are satisfied.[3]

There may be loud objections to the use of the biblical metaphor of bread as an approach to today's economic realities. Nothing, after all, produces more angry messages on a preacher's email than "mixing politics and religion." But what are we to make of Jesus' politics in the Gospel for the Second Sunday in Lent, Luke 13:31-35? Jesus sends a provocative political message to Herod, the wielder of Rome's subjugation and the builder of grand palaces in a poor, occupied country, addressing him derisively as that old "fox." This message seals Jesus' fate with the political powers who are seeking to execute him. Jesus essentially tells Herod to leave him alone while he finishes his work, the work among the people whom Herod spurns, the work of redemption that God has given him to do. Then Jesus weeps over the city he loves, wanting to gather Jerusalem's children under God's wings in a "mother-hen economy" of infinite care and protection.

On the Fourth Sunday in Lent we hear the story from Luke 15 (1-3, 11*b*-32) of the son who was lost, as good as dead, but was welcomed by his father with feasting and dancing into the household of life. Those in the far country of desolation and hunger will hear this story as good news. God is willing to change the household rules for them.

The older brother is unhappy in this story because he has done everything according to the rules of the old economy and deserves possessions and a comfortable life. It bothers him that someone as undeserving as his younger brother should receive what he considers his due. The older son prefers the old economy in which he knows what is his right to own, and he does not want the old rules overturned. The younger son expects nothing upon his return, but his father's excessive gifting creates a new future for him by integrating him into the "resurrection household." God is building a new economy in which everyone—including the poor, the forsaken, the lost, and the dying—is invited to feast and dance in the resurrection household.

At another feast, this one at the home of Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead, we witness an extravagant gift, and our assumptions about our relationship with the poor are challenged. In John 12:1-8, the Gospel for Lent 5, Mary, Lazarus's sister, interrupts the dinner and changes the table manners of polite society with an astonishing and lavish act of adoration. She anoints Jesus' feet with copious amounts of costly perfume and wipes them with her hair. When Judas criticizes Mary's gift, citing the need to help the poor, his motivation and behavior are called into question by the narrator. By contrast, Jesus praises Mary for her foresight in preparing for the gift he is about to give, the gift of his life. Mary anoints Jesus for his burial and demonstrates the life of love that Jesus will later extend to the community in the foot washing.

Toward a Eucharistic Economy

Lent ends on Holy Thursday with the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The epistle reading for Holy Thursday, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, is Paul's bare bones description of what happens at Holy Communion. In the verses preceding the lectionary reading, we discover what necessitated Paul's calling the Corinthian church back to the meaning conveyed to him "from the Lord" (v. 23). Their celebration of the Lord's Supper was a travesty because it perpetuated a situation of economic disparity among the believers: "For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk" (v. 21). In other words, there was no communal sharing, no just distribution of the bread, no communion of life; the result was that some had too little bread and some had too much drink. Those with too little were humiliated; those with too much showed "contempt for the church of God" (v. 22).

In the earliest days of the church, then, the meaning of social goods in the community was learned at the Eucharist. When Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives bread, he is performing the shared communal meaning of the social good, bread, and by extension, asking us to define all social goods necessary for life by this bread. All are invited freely to this meal, and each participant gains through the meal an awareness of all those others who are also invited. Together with the poor, the oppressed, the sinners, and the dying, we share the meaning of all social goods through Christ's body. God's history with bread culminates in Jesus' own utterance of the shared communal meaning of bread, "This is my body which is broken for you and for *all*." We learn at the Lord's Supper that certain goods appropriate to the life and dignity of people are not exhaustively commodities; namely, those social goods necessary for life and life abundant may not be withheld from those who need them.[4]

This meal blocks all use and exchange of social goods for the purpose of domination. To be specific, those in God's household will not tolerate the blockading of food and medicine to bring an enemy nation to submission, the holding hostage for political gain programs that assure access to healthcare, shelter, and food, or the determination of national economic policies by the desire to dominate world markets when such domination prevents food and medicine from reaching poor nations.

The Gospel for Holy Thursday dramatically illustrates Jesus' Eucharistic economy. The centerpiece of John's account of Jesus' last meal with his disciples is the foot washing (John 13:1-17, 31*b*-35). Here we see Jesus putting aside the dominant role that is his due—"You call me Teacher and Lord" (v. 13)—by creating a community of mutuality. Jesus shows his disciples the cleansing and transforming power of his coming death by tying a towel around himself and becoming a household slave. The image became a pivotal one for the church and is at the startling center of our great christological hymn, read on Palm Sunday. It begins:

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross (Phil 2:5-8).

Proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor means proclaiming an end to slavery and domination because our Lord Jesus Christ became a household slave—an economist in the ancient sense—who died, rose, and was exalted to rule over all at the right hand of God. Preaching on economics in an election year means calling attention to the kinds of slavery and domination rampant in our society: slavery to the market that we assume can solve all problems, slavery to debt, slavery to success, addictions, consumerism, and slavery to the fear of death. Primarily it means opening up for God's people the possibility, present and future, of the life of freedom in God's household, where all people have a place at the table. Jesus proclaims Isaiah's prophecy fulfilled in our midst. Jesus has turned the economy of slavery and debt on its ear by his willingness to be a slave, obedient even to death on a cross. Let the same mind be in us.

Notes

[1] M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 83-85.

[2] "Data Bite," *Christian Century* 120:21 (18 October 2003):15.

[3] Meeks, *God the Economist,* 175, 178.

[4] Ibid., 179.