

Sunday, September 21, 2008
Economics: Biblical Style

A Sermon preached at Southminster Presbyterian Church
September 21, 2008
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Matt 20:1-16 and Exodus 16:1-21

When we left the Israelites last week, they were standing on the other side of the Red Sea and watching the destruction of the Egyptian army. The superpower of the day was demolished at the hands of the God of Abraham and Jacob. And then in chapter 15, the Israelites do what we should always do on the other side of deliverance—they give thanks. The entire chapter is a song of praise to the Lord for their deliverance. So, before we get to today's text, let me ask you—how often do we see people giving thanks in our world today? How many people are intentional about living in that kind of gratitude? Watch for that this week. At school or work. In your own life or on the news. Where do you see gratitude?

Then the Israelites camp at a place called Elim. It would be the equivalent of Palm Springs. Desert all around and then this oasis of water, golf courses and boutique shopping. I suspect their attitude of gratitude remains while they are at the resort.

And then our text picks up this morning with this.

"The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness."

Wait. What?

Didn't they get over their complaining and choose to trust in God's deliverance? Weren't they just living in gratitude and giving thanks to God? And now we're back to this?

"If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread. For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Okay, forget what I said about the Israelites living in gratitude.

By verse three they have fallen back quickly into their habits of anxiety and fear.

But, once again, I find myself needing to cut the whining Israelites some slack. When they wish to return to the fleshpots of Egypt, where life may not have been great but they at least had bread, are they any different than we are when we sing along to Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days"?

We just sit around talking about the old times,
she says when she feels like crying
she starts laughing thinking about
Glory days well they'll pass you by
Glory days in the wink of a young girl's eye
Glory days, glory days

While it was part whining and complaining, perhaps it was also the equivalent of the Israelites sitting around in a bar, reminiscing about the "good old days" of high school, as Bruce describes. Maybe remembering the past, even a bad past, with fondness is a coping mechanism when you fear the future.

But God is always, ALWAYS, calling us forward, into that scary future and out of the past. Yes, we tell the stories of our past, and we remember from whence we came, but we are always called forward, out of our so-called glory days.

And I am thankful that we have a God who keeps at us, who hears our whining, lament, complaining, and fear and then gives us another opportunity to live into the deliverance.

Because God hears the Israelites' complaints of hunger and says that bread from heaven will rain on them each day, but only providing enough for that day.

"And in that way", God says, "I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not."

Maybe this story is less about the miracle of the manna and more a story about people learning to follow directions. God is trying, one day at a time, one serving of manna at a time, to pull the Israelites into a future of abundance. And it is hard for them. The first day, they grab extra and try to store it away because what if it doesn't show up tomorrow??? And it bred worms and became foul.

So, day by day, the Israelites learn to trust in God's provision. And they learn a system of economics that is far different from that of Pharaoh. They gathered the manna, each as much as they needed, and those who had gathered much had nothing left over and those who gathered little had no

shortage. They gathered as much as each of them needed. Day by day, the Israelites learned that true wealth is having what you need. This was quite a different message from Pharaoh, who was having his slaves build pyramids so that not only would Pharaoh have more than his share in this life, but he'd also have a place to store it in the next. But it is hard to carry your pyramids around with you in the desert. You have to let go of some things to move into the Promised Land. And anxiety about having enough is one of those things that they have to let go to leave Egypt.

And, day by day, the Israelites grew into this new model of economics. I'd like to tell us it is just that simple. But if you look ahead in the text a bit, you'll see that this day after day after day process of living into trust and into God's abundance took a long time. They ate manna in the wilderness for 40 years.

And, maybe the miracle in this story, after the miracle of learning to follow directions, is the miracle of letting go. The miracle of not trying to control God's gift of abundance.

That's what manna was. God's inexplicable gift of abundance. And the Israelites wanted to turn it into a commodity. Can we hear the wheels turning in their heads?

"We can take this extra manna and we can sell it! Or we can give it to other folks we meet out here in the wilderness. There is a huge untapped market for free food here! We'll be rich and we can retire when we're 30!"

Okay, I don't know if that is actually what they were thinking, but when we add the Matthew text in here, it makes me wonder.

Matthew tells a story to help his followers see what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. And when Matthew uses that term, he's not talking about some future location—he's talking about here and now. How we live as God's people today. The owner of the vineyard goes down to Home Depot, or wherever it is here in Jerusalem where the day laborers wait for jobs, and he hires some folks for \$20. They get busy, bringing in the harvest, thankful to have been chosen out of all of the people who were there looking for work.

A few hours later, the owner goes out to grab his double mocha at Starbucks and sees more people in front of Home Depot, still looking for work. So he hires them too. "I'll pay you what is right," he says to them. They don't worry

about the details because they, too, are thankful to have been chosen when so many people are looking for work.

And on it goes. He goes back at noon, at 3 and even again at 5:00.

What about those people who were still there at 5:00 looking for work?

What is that like? Is that what faith is—sitting there from 6:00 am to 5:00 pm, just hoping and praying that something is going to work out for you?

That a little bit of manna will be passed your way?

And then he pays them all the same amount. One hour of work or 10, they get the same amount.

But the laborers who were hired first thing in the morning don't like it and want to know why these late comers are getting paid the same they are.

"These guys worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us!"

"Friend, I am doing you no wrong", says the owner of the vineyard. "Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"

There it is again. The economics of grace is so at odds with Pharaoh's model of scarcity. Because the owner is right, of course. He paid the laborers what he told them he'd pay them. Before they'd done their labor, they'd agreed that it was enough money. But once he started paying other people the same, they needed more. But what if we started living as if having enough was good enough?

I know that by using the word "economics", some of you might be thinking only about money. Money is a part of it, but I encourage you to see money as only a small portion of God's economics. Because how we use our money indicates what we believe about God and God's provision, but it is only a piece of it. God's economics are about the whole of our lives.

How often do we live as if what we have is sufficient?

I hope that it is our daily practice. I invite it to be our daily practice.

Because if we were to drop ourselves into this parable, things get sticky. It seems clear that God is the owner of the vineyard, but we want to figure out where we fit. And here's the problem—when we get hung up on the question of who we are in this parable—are we the people who started working early in the day or the people who got hired at the end—we miss the point. It doesn't matter if we worked all day or were lucky to get hired at all—we all

get what we need. That is the strange and beautiful economics of grace. God gives it. We receive it. But we can't control how other people receive it. And it is not our job to question how God parcels it out.

So, as you go through your week, I invite you to do so in gratitude, picking up the manna that God provides for you, leaving enough manna so that your companions on the journey can receive some too, and trusting that there will be more tomorrow. That is the economics of God's grace—it is more than we deserve and it is just what we need.