



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 16
Proper 20 (A)

The Economics of God

[RCL] Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

The economics of God are not like our human economics. Time after time, we humans just do not get the economics of God. In Scripture readings for today, we have reminders of the ways we miss the point about God's economics. We also have a way through our incomprehension to a deeper understanding and a better way to live. In the name of this God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The people of Israel have participated in the stupendous exodus by which God took them away from the false economy, the slave society, known as Egypt; despite all odds, they have escaped from the control of the Pharaoh administration.

The breathtaking experience at the Red Sea is still fresh in their minds: how, with the Egyptian cavalry in hot pursuit, they saw the waters part to give them dry passage to the other side. The first of the Israelites to step on dry land where there had been deep water only moments before was a person of great faith. Once the band of escaping slaves made it to the other side, then crashing down came the waters of the sea, not to drown them, but to wash away the Egyptian army.

The experience was stunning. But shortly afterward comes the episode reported in today's Exodus reading. What is it that the people do? They forget. They complain. They cast accusations. Hear these Israelites again: "If only we had died in the slave economy, where there was no freedom but plenty of food! But you, Moses and Aaron, you have brought us out to the middle of nowhere so that we will starve to death."

They are like every group—including ourselves at times—in forgetting the first lesson of the divine economy: *Remember the Lord's goodness and be thankful.*

Responding to this through Moses, the Lord sounds offended – and with reason. But the Lord does not punish; instead, he demonstrates yet again his tremendous generosity. They complain, not so much against Moses and Aaron, but against God their deliverer. He responds by giving them something. Something they need. Something they can use. Something they cannot recognize.

Bread from heaven is what he gives. But they can make no sense of it. They say to each other, “Manna?” which means something like, “What is this stuff?” And so, manna becomes its name. The food sustains them, but at first, they do not recognize it.

Another lesson of God’s economy: *Too often the gifts go unrecognized.*

God gives them bread. Enough to sustain them every single day. Yet they are more than harvesters. On the sixth day, they can gather a double portion to tide them over on the sabbath, the day of rest.

And so, more lessons from the divine economy. *God provides. God provides. Enough to meet our needs, but not our greeds.*

And something more. *We are to work to live, not live to work. We must have periods devoted to rest, refreshment, and rejoicing with God in God’s goodness.*

So then, if we live gratefully, aware of divine giving past and present, then we have internalized lessons from the divine economics. If these lessons reside in our hearts, we will not slip back into the slave economics of Egypt, but instead progress toward the deeper freedom with God for which we exist.

Now to today’s gospel and the labor management story Jesus tells. What does the reign of God resemble? What can we know of God’s economy?

It’s like this. A landowner pays all the day-laborers the same, even though some started work at dawn and others were hired at later times in the day. Each laborer receives the same amount. Unfair, certainly? No!

Each one receives enough to live on for that day. Nobody goes without the essentials of life because of the vagaries of circumstance. This landowner practices a higher justice, keeping laborers and their families alive, because in the end, life is more important than money.

The higher justice of the landowner scandalizes the all-day workers. So, the landowner questions them: “Are you envious because I am generous?”

God sometimes questions us in this way when we begrudge people what they need. “Are you envious because I am generous?”

Here’s another lesson from the divine economy. *God cares about everybody’s welfare, loving us all without discrimination, recognizing in each one a dignity that reflects the divine splendor.*

So then, we have reviewed lessons from the economics of God.

- Remember the goodness of the Holy One and be thankful.

- Too often gifts go unrecognized.
- God provides. God provides.
- We are to work to live, not live to work.
- God cares about everybody's welfare.

We have a hard time learning these lessons in divine economics, just as the Israelites in the wilderness forgot God's deliverance and failed to recognize manna for the gift it was. They grumbled. We have a hard time learning these lessons, just as the all-day workers were enraged when the boss paid everybody the same, the usual daily wage, and put nothing extra in their envelopes. They grumbled.

Learning the lessons of divine economy is hard when we are distracted by ungodly economics, something that recurs in this world. The prophet Amos spoke of ungodly economics long ago when he denounced selling the needy for a pair of sandals, trampling the head of the poor into the dust, pushing the afflicted out of the way. Ungodly economics takes twenty-first century forms, but in time will experience defeat, for lies have no staying power.

Sunday by Sunday, Christians gather to learn and learn again the economics of God through what happens in this place. We learn lessons of the divine economy in order to put them into practice. We must practice some economy. Which one shall it be?

God reveals to us the economy characteristic of the divine reign so that by grace we may pursue on earth the way that prevails in heaven, a way shown to us even today.

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