

A Divine Economy

When I came to Granville for my initial visit during my interview process, I had the pleasure of meeting several activists in our community - one of them being Alan Schwartz from the Newark Think Tank on Poverty. I remember that a group of us were sitting outside of Ceciel and Jack's house, enjoying a lovely lunch on a budding fall day while talking systemic injustice, when Alan asked me where I was from.

"The Chicagoland area," I said.

"I lived in Chicago," he replied. "Whereabouts?"

"Woodstock," I responded.

He perked up.

"Woodstock! I know Woodstock. Did you know that Eugene V. Debs was held in Woodstock's jail after he was arrested," he asked?

"No, I didn't," I replied, "I thought our only claim to fame was Groundhog Day."

"Oh no," he said, "Woodstock held arguably one of America's great socialists and founders of the labor movement."

Now I'm paraphrasing a bit, but Alan continued on to talk about the Haymarket Riot, Debs' presidential candidacies and activism. And, as embarrassed as I am to say this, I didn't know of him. But, on that afternoon I sure got an education, as I am now keenly aware of just how instrumental Debs was to the recognition of Labor Day.

The year was 1894, when Debs helped to cripple the American economy and railway by calling for a boycott of all Pullman railway cars. You see the railway workers - mostly Black men - were working under the deplorable conditions during the blossoming Industrial Revolution: 12 hour days, seven days a week - children ages 5 and 6, were toiling for a fraction of the wage - with no access to safe or sanitary conditions. The unions had had *enough*. The government, in response, dispatched troops to Chicago, leading to riots and the deaths of several workers. Two days later, President Cleveland signed Labor Day into law.

It turns out that the economy holds a lot of sway.

After all, we hear a lot about it these days, don't we? Words like **recession, inflation, bear market, GDP, national debt, taxes, job reports, and the value of the U.S. dollar** dominate the airways. Our nation seems to be transfixed by *costs*: forgiving student loan debt? *Well how much is THAT going to cost me?* Exploring and cultivating more sustainable practices and

ways of living? *Oh great, there goes more of my hard-earned tax dollars.*

Our eyes seem collectively drawn to some imaginary bottom line, ever sizing up the *cost*: but *costs* aren't always reflected in decimals, dollars, and cents now, are they?

Thank goodness for a divine economy.

Now I'm not going to lie: in almost *every* imaginable way, this economy is **harder**. And that's because there is no balance sheet - God doesn't make her tax records public nor does she seem to do her record keeping in a linear or comprehensible fashion. Much of it remains cloaked in mystery. We see beautiful things and we see awful things and we don't know why - why bad things happen to good people, why cancer, why Covid - if you're like me then you crave the comfort of a Psalm 23 or even an MLK when he says that the arc of history bends towards justice. Because in a divine economy we're asked to trust in God's accounting - and that's not often an easy thing to do. So how do we embrace, how do we put our faith behind this alternative economy?

Well, for today, we can look at Jesus.

Because our text this morning puts flesh onto this divine economy. But first, we need to understand its context, because on the surface it reads pretty

brutal - and it is, as I said before - a divine economy *is* harder. Jesus wasn't exactly a pushover, let's admit it: he tends to make things more difficult. Nonetheless, here's what we need to understand in these verses: first, the use of **hyperbole** - in other translations, like the NRSV, the word "hate" gets deployed in this text - we need to understand that these are **literary devices and not literal ones** - these passages are being told in such a way as to make a point or to evoke a strong reaction - I'd say they're pretty successful at that. There's one. Two, we need a first-century understanding of the nuclear family, if that's even possible. You see, at the time of Jesus' ministry society was highly family-driven: bloodlines were of utmost importance, family members had responsibilities to one another, and to bring shame or humiliation upon the family was strictly forbidden. You didn't just leave your family behind, as we may remember from the infamous Prodigal Son. Family was of the utmost importance - that's two. Three, voluntary poverty was not a virtue in rabbinic sources. While Luke infers as much here, the rabbinical texts are clear: voluntary poverty creates hardship for the *family*, and family, as we know, comes *first*. So, the practice of almsgiving? Absolutely. But voluntary poverty? Not so much.

So, three key points to keep in mind this morning as we consider what's at stake here with Jesus. And as I read this text, what I see Jesus

doing is ushering in a **divine economy** which, of course, is *completely* countercultural and at odds with ancient, and postmodern, for that matter, accounting. But how?

First, Jesus says that you need to turn your back on your family in order to follow him. BIG no-no, as we've already stated. So why would Jesus say this? Again, part of it is literary, but the other part of it is to **raise the stakes: if you want to be a disciple, be prepared to renounce the accepted order of things.** Society says that family comes first? *Not so fast.* In this kingdom, nuclear family is moot. So he encourages his listeners to *count the cost*: you're going to have to give up what you *think* matters most.

Second, take up the cross. Now the cross, my friends, is symbolic of many things, one of them being *humiliation* - the penalty of crucifixion was perhaps the most public and humiliating one - and so by telling the crowds that they'd have to take up the cross meant that they'd have to be willing to submit to *humiliation*. And, again, we know this from before: first-century families don't *do* humiliation. So now we've not only got to split from our families, but suffer humiliation as well?

I told you this divine economy stuff was hard.

Third, say goodbye to all of your possessions. Now, again, rabbinic sources don't endorse voluntary poverty - this is likely another literary move, but it's unclear - this is Jesus talking after all. Bottom line? **He wants us to carefully count the costs of discipleship.** He wants us to know, to consent fully, to what's at risk if we choose to go all-in on this new order of things.

And that risk? **It's letting go: of all of our cherished attachments, in their various forms - family, friends, reputation, stuff, comfort, control - you name it. Because a divine economy is not about what you're able to gain, or produce - it's about what you're willing to release, or let go.**

And, again, I think that this is a *much* tougher economy than the one we presently face.

Which is why I turned to a Tibetan Buddhist for our first reading today, because this economy is all about **non-attachment and surrender**, which I find the Buddhists to be particularly adept at. It's about pulling back the veil, pulling back the curtain to see reality for what it is, society for what it is - it challenges us to go deep within, to that still and wise space where the Spirit dwells and our desires burn - where are we clinging? Where are we grasping? Where are we suffering as a result of our attachments to

persons, or places, or things? How are we ensnared in our own habitual feelings and reactions, swept up in the current of our fears and frustrations? **What needs to be let go?** I think that is the ultimate transaction in this economy, an economy of divine surrender: ***what can I lose, and what is the cost if I don't?***

Kinda sucks, right?

But this is kin-dom economy! This is love of neighbor stuff! This is work that doesn't only privilege your immediate family and friends but *all* of creation - we're all intertwined and it all matters! This is where we empty our hands of our stuff, clean out our backpacks loaded down with heavy burdens and instead take up a cross that marks us and says, Hey, I don't buy into this capitalistic, individualistic, dog-eat-dog economy, go ahead, laugh at me, I don't care! It's the economy where we give to the poor and the marginalized, where we address the systemic injustices, where we lift up our unsheltered neighbors in Newark and our family in Mississippi and our beloved in Pakistan and work to address the devastating effects of a climate neglected. This economy doesn't care about what is *fair*, friends - it cares about what is *just*. And often that justice comes in the form of us ***letting go.***

So I ask us all today, as disciples and neighbors of the world, *what do we need to renounce in order to participate in this divine economy of God?* To what end should we labor? Because the costs of *not* participating? Well, they're adding up - the spiritual costs, the relational costs, the emotional costs, the environmental costs, the cost of violence - something's gotta give. And although the costs may seem high, the payoff? It's *freedom. Love. Interbeing.* And that sure sounds like the kingdom to me.

Meet you there.

Amen.