

Year A – “*The Economy of God*”

“*Grant us Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things,*”
(*Collect of the Day, proper 20*)

Anxiety about earthly things seems to be the theme of our lives these days. More and more people are jobless. The stock market is like a roller coaster – and most of us just hang on and hope we survive the ride. Our governmental leaders want to lead but seem to be engaged in a push me-pull you exercise with not much end in sight. Ever since 9/11, anxiety about our safety has been a major concern. We’re involved in a war that seems to go on forever and is bankrupting us. Hope and confidence are at an all-time low.

“*Grant us Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things,*”

We surely need that. For so much of our public life and reactions and daily decisions seem to be related to our anxiety and fear about the economy.

Ramon Pannikar, in his book “Christophany” writes: “*The crisis of our age is, above all, the crisis of man, whom we have reduced to an economic factor in the great cogwheel of competitiveness.*”¹ His vision is of a different world in which a human being is fully alive in the human and divine nature in which s/he was created. When our lives are reduced to economics, when our concern is bound up with “earthly things”, we, he would say, are dead to the true and real life that we have been given.

The word “economics” comes from the Greek, “*oikonomos*”, which actually means, the manager of a household or a steward. So, economics, which is a complex interplay of work, goods, exchange of money, power and competitiveness, is actually the stuff of stewardship. Imagine what our lives would be like as a nation if we truly regarded ourselves as stewards of what does not belong to us.

Now, when we throw the word “stewardship” around the church (the place where you are most likely to hear it!), we often all hear what it is that we give financially to the church. But we know that stewardship is actually more than that. Stewardship is about the management of our daily lives, our relationships, our work, our play, and the places in which we dwell, worship, learn, work and play. It’s also about our care of the earth and all of its creatures.

When we use the word “economics” we tend to think that we are the owners of all that falls under our purview. The word “stewardship” reminds of the real truth: we don’t own anything. “The earth is the Lord’s for he made it”, says Psalm 95. We don’t own anything. We are stewards of all that is entrusted to us. It is from that understanding that Jesus teaches his disciples.

And, as usual, his teaching flies in the face of our understanding of “economics”. Economics in the kingdom of heaven is different. “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out to hire laborers for his vineyard.” And we know the rest. The landowner goes out at different hours of the day and brings back those who are idle to work. And at the end of the day, he pays them all a day’s wage. What’s our response to this? Preposterous! Call in the labor union! Go to court! This is unfair labor practice!

Jesus’ parables are designed to get us agitated and thinking. In fact, Cynthia Bourgeault, in her recording, *The Wisdom Jesus*, talks about how their real purpose is to “fry the brain”, stop it in its tracks, so that we can see the deeper meaning with a larger consciousness that is often called the heart.² We are invited into a path following Jesus that guides us to the very center of our being and back out into the world again, as transformed human beings who actually see the world differently and therefore act differently.

The life of God that Jesus knew and lived makes no sense to the average Western human being. That's because the kingdom of heaven is around us, in us, and through us. The kingdom of heaven is that life that abounds and can be seen and known in the present moment of our daily lives. It is the eye of the heart that sees it.

Of course we don't always act as if that were true.

A young man was driving to work on a lovely day. The light turned yellow, just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection.

The tailgating woman was furious and honked her horn, screaming in frustration, as she missed her chance to get through the intersection, dropping her cell phone and makeup.

As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up.

He took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do' bumper sticker, the 'Choose Life' license plate holder, the 'Follow Me to Sunday-School' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk, so naturally....I assumed you had stolen the car."

We are made to live differently. The path to this heart awareness, says Jesus, is a path of extravagant outpouring of love. The landowner is extravagant, generous, compassionate, and we would say, loving and caring of those who work in his vineyard. It is this generosity of spirit and life that Jesus himself lives out. He is inviting all of us into a path in which our false self is emptied out³, so that the first is last, and as Paul says in his letters, dying is actually gain. What we gain is the ability to see the world and ourselves differently, as embedded in divine life and as the evidence of that life itself.

That leads us into a world-view in which our economy can be seen as fundamentally about the quality of our relationships and the stewardship of the abundant life that we have been given. It takes us into the abiding life of God's love, which no matter what our situation, will sustain and uphold us in what really matters.

"Grant us Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things,"

You are stewards of the creation of God. You are stewards of the mission of God that is manifest through the church. You are stewards who do not need to be anxious. For, like the Hebrews in the wilderness, all that you need will be and already has been provided by God.

"Grant us Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, . . ." Amen.

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¹ Pannikar, Ramon. Christophany. Orbis Books: NY, 2004. p. 32.

² Bourgeault, Cynthia. The Wisdom Jesus, Sounds True (CD), 2005.

³ The self which must be let go is a false self that we have constructed out of our upbringing and culture. When we let go of what we think of as ourselves, we discover the true, God-given self that is accepted, forgiven and loved. This process is a life-long one in which we learn to let go and discover the life that is waiting to be born in and around us.