

«A Land of Milk and Honey – reflections on the economy»

Sermon by Rev. Patty Hanneman, April 19, 2009

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

Every morning of the World Economic Forum a few weeks ago, CNN interviewed a different bundled-up CEO in Davos, Switzerland, and the question was always the same: “When will this economic crisis be over?” They had a whiteboard where each CEO would write their prediction: 2009... 2010... 2011... later. For those of us who are suffering through this crisis, having lost a job, retirement income, or have taken a reduction in hours worked; for those of us who are no longer certain of sending our kids to college or whether we’ll ever see another weekend at the beach, that is indeed our most pressing question. When will this crisis be over? When will I get my life back? The life I planned and saved for? I wish I knew the answers to those questions, but I confess that as important as those questions are, I cannot hazard a guess.

But this morning I want to ask another question that perhaps we as a community of faith can begin to address, and that is, “how will this crisis change us?” Last week on Easter Sunday we talked about the process of resurrection, and I argued that we often need to be grabbed by the napes of our necks, maybe scared out of our wits, before we really pay attention so that real change can take place. This crisis gives us such an opportunity – to look at the ways in which we think, act, and decide things, how we live and do business. I know that this is a structural crisis that clearly calls for new social regulation of our financial system. But it is also a spiritual crisis that calls for new self-regulation.

We seem to have lost some things and forgotten some things – like our oldest and finest values. Many of those values are grounded in our Judeo-Christian heritage, in particular the moral foundation laid down in the Hebrew Scriptures that provide guidelines for living in community. Guidelines set down by the leaders of the tribe of Israel during the exodus from Egypt. Guidelines that have been forgotten or ignored time and time again, then called upon by various prophets when crisis were about to happen or had already happened, in an effort to return the children of Israel back to their covenant with one another.

The Old Testament is relentless in its analysis and condemnation of self-destructive economics. But it is also powerfully generative in imagining an alternative to these destructive ways. The root experience of the Israelites that guided their view of economics is their fall into Egyptian slavery. You see, there had been a famine in their land, and many of the people of Abraham – the ancestors of the Israelites - were starving. And there was food along the Nile in Egypt, so in order to feed themselves and their families, many of these people sold themselves into slavery for food, or bought food from the Egyptians on credit. But because the famine continued, they were unable to repay their debts. In time, almost the entire tribe of Abraham was enslaved. The memory of the corrosive destructiveness of deep, extended debt, and of the wide difference between the haves and the have-nots, informed their laws and their lives. And I would argue that

today in *this* county, while we no longer allow slavery, we are in a sense creating similar conditions of indebtedness that enslave people's souls.

I recently read an article written by theologian Walter Brueggemann¹ that talks about the continuous movement throughout the biblical narrative, from the economic system put in place by Moses and the leaders of the Exodus - one that was to bring the people much peace and prosperity, and the destructive economic systems that the prophets railed about, and then back again. In fact, much of the prophetic tradition in the Old Testament speaks to the issues of economics. Brueggemann's analysis is relevant to our crisis today. He says first of all that the destructive economic systems in the biblical narratives were consistent with a cycle of autonomy, anxiety, and greed, whereas generative economics were consistent with a process of covenant, abundance, and generosity. I know this sounds a bit Polly Ann-ish and over-simplified, but hear me out.

Destructive economics, Brueggemann writes, begins with a sense of the isolated, self-sufficient economic individual that imagines itself to be the primary unit of social reality. This individual is accountable to no one, and relies on no one but herself. Such an economic self feels the right to act without constraint and is self-authorized to organize life around her own needs, issues and purposes. The economic self understands the market to be of ultimate value, a place for self-advancement, often at the expense of others who are competitors or rivals. This autonomous individual is known as "the fool" in the Hebrew Scriptures, who thinks in her heart "God has forgotten... He will never see it." (Ps. 10:9-10).

Brueggemann writes that this kind of theological autonomy, living outside the restraint of love and compassion, is also without the resources of love and compassion. The outcome of living without the gifts of allies or support is an endless process of anxiety, for one never has enough or has done enough to feel safe. As a result, this autonomous person, which our current market theories champion, becomes caught in an endless rat race of achievement that produces bottomless anxiety – about the market, about performance, about self-worth. There is no place to go but to just "suck it up" and keep on moving. In Leviticus 26: 36-37, Moses describes this kind of individual cut off from community or God as fated to live a cursed life: "The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight... they shall stumble over one another, as if to escape a sword, though no one pursues." Have you watched the sporadic activity of the stock market lately?

This autonomous person, beset by anxiety, can only resolve to do better, make quicker decisions, get more, so that life becomes a passionate pursuit of every form of security and self-worth, most particularly through the acquisition of money. And this is why even those with the most are anxious that they do not yet have enough, and because this anxiety has become a national standard, there is collusion between those who have much but want more, and those who have little but long for much. It is this collusion that results in things like sub prime loans, which creditors see as easy income, and debtors imagine as a better life beyond their current deprivation.

The theological-ethical issue for us today is how we step out of this cycle of autonomy/anxiety/greediness, this hopeless, self-devouring process, to imagine a different way of being in the world? Brueggemann suggests that an alternative is not possible until we can change our view of the individual from being autonomous to being relational. Our Unitarian forebears

understood the primacy of living in covenantal community, as did the Israelites coming out of Egypt. A covenantal existence is an invitation away from autonomy to a relationship that binds the individual to the Holy and to those around us who are members in a common economy.

For purposes of our conversation this morning, perhaps the most compelling biblical text is Deuteronomy 15: 1-18: the provision of Moses for the regular cancellation of debts for poor people. Every seven years, all debts were forgiven so that no one was perpetually poor due to indebtedness. The purpose of this law is to subordinate issues of fairness to the healthy future of the neighborhood. On the one hand, the law is rooted in Israel's memory of debt slavery in Egypt. On the other hand, the law reflects the human tendency to resist neighborly economics, because we humans tend to be "hard-hearted and tight-fisted." I've had to re-read this passage lately when I find myself getting huffy about people having their houses refinanced with lower principles and interest rates. What about me? Me who has always paid my payments on time and didn't get in over my head? The fact is, a covenantal economics would tell us that this kind of huffiness is the resistance of the autonomous self, a resistance that Moses would have had little tolerance for.

Having vetoed autonomy, covenantal existence is an invitation away from anxiety to the abundance of shared resources. I'm not advocating that we all go back to living in communes. I am advocating the sort of abundance that was evident when Jesus fed the multitudes and had fourteen baskets of food left over at the end of the day. I'm advocating the sort of abundance that is ours when we understand that greed and hoarding is an inappropriate reaction to this crisis. This kind of miracle is never available to the autonomous individual. True generosity happens when we decide to see others, not as threats or competitors, but as brothers and sisters whose lives are tied to our own. A biblical ethic affirms that all members of society – including the poor, even what Moses referred to as the "undeserving poor" – are legitimate recipients of enough to live with dignity and in safety.

It took the people of Israel 40 years to move from debt slavery to their land of milk and honey. They spent a lot of time in the wilderness learning the lessons that are outlined here. One of their "wilderness lessons" was the futility of engaging in disputes over labels. From a biblical perspective, labels like "socialism" or "capitalism" are irrelevant. What is relevant was their insistence that every available instrument of well-being - whether it be through government, civic organizations, the private sector, or individual charity – that they all be mobilized in order to use the resources of the community for the common good. Face-to-face neighborly acts as well as new tax structures as well as changes in the scale within corporations – all these are ways to address the lesson that relationships matter. What is also relevant is that the Israelites had no idea how long they would be in the wilderness, and neither do we.

What they learned, and what we need to learn as well, is that we need to move forward, even without knowing.

A good friend of mine by the name of Heather Brewer sent me a list this week which she calls her "emotional bailout plan." I call it my "wilderness survival kit." They are thoughts to keep in mind as we weather this storm. The key words in the list are *pay*, *spend*, *save*, *credit*, *invest*, *diversify*, and *debit*. Here it is:

- Pay attention to where you put your attention as this directly affects our emotions. Limit your news intake and read inspirational or intellectually stimulating books or watch uplifting movies.
- Spend time each night listing five things you are grateful for, whether it's as small as clean water from your tap or as large as finding or keeping a job.
- Save yourself from negative self-talk and replace these thoughts with more positive ones. Keep your mind filled with thoughts of what you want, not what you don't want.
- Credit yourself for all you do to make the world a better place whether by a beautiful spring garden, a smile to a stranger or volunteering time to those less fortunate. We all do make a difference.
- Invest your most valuable asset, your time, in things that will double your investment, such as quality time with family and friends, a 30-minute walk in nature or time in prayer or meditation.
- Diversify your interests. Make a list of experiences you'd like to have in your lifetime and pick one to complete. Maybe you will travel to a new place, train for a 5K or learn to tap dance.
- Debit a past hurt from your emotional bank and forgive a person who hurt you. Being able to forgive creates more room for joy now that you are no longer putting anger into anger and hurt.

If we learn nothing from this crisis, then all the pain and suffering it continues to cause will be in vain. But if we can learn new habits of the heart, perhaps that suffering can be redemptive. If we can regain our moral compass – as individuals and as a nation – if we can find new metrics by which to measure our success – like less focus on our GDP and more focus on the quality of our lives, then this crisis could be our opportunity for change. So the question I ask is not, how long will this last, but how will it change us? Will we transform ourselves to meet our new challenges, or will we simply wait to get back to business as usual? The key to learning is in the questions we ask. My hope is that a new covenantal consciousness will be a part of our answer. May it be so, and blessed be.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Sojourners Magazine*, February 2009.