

Sermon for Lent 4C
Sunday, March 31, 2019
“God’s Economy”

Text: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There’s a basic principle of economics called the law of supply and demand. The principle basically states that the availability of something and the desire of people to have it will affect the price. If the supply is low and the demand is high, the price will go up. Say there are some apples that are nice and fresh, beautiful red or green, all shiny and tasty looking. Easter is coming and everyone in town wants to bake a pie, but because it’s cold up here in New York in April and the apples had to be brought in from down south somewhere, only a few baskets are available. Those apples will be very expensive. Then after Easter, not all of the apples were sold. Now they’re starting to look old, kind of wrinkly, not very pretty, maybe they have some soft brown spots on them by now. There will be on sale for 50% off. The store will essentially be ready to give the apples away. Things that are of great value are usually considered such because there isn’t a lot of it to go around, but lots of people want it. Although most of us would like to receive something valuable for as little as possible—like we’d all like free health insurance, but we don’t want to pay sufficient taxes in order to pay for it—we know that valuable things cost a lot of money. That’s the way things work in a capitalistic economy like ours.

But I’m not here this morning to talk about the wonderful things about capitalism and the economy of the world, I am here to talk about God and his economy. And in God’s economy, things work very differently. In God’s economy there is something of great value that we *can* get for little or nothing, something we don’t have to work too hard for, because it is available to us at any time. And that thing is God’s grace and mercy—the love of God that he gives us even when we don’t deserve it, or the punishment he doesn’t give us when we *do* deserve it. That’s the way things work in God’s economy.

Today’s Gospel lesson is a lesson in God’s economy. It is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It is the story of a young man who gets antsy in his youth and asks for his inheritance. He then goes off and does the wild thing in a far off land, spends all of the money that his father gave him,

can't maintain the high-energy lifestyle, hits rock bottom, comes to his senses, and returns home to his father, undoubtedly embarrassed, certainly eating his words after he had been forced to eat slop with the pigs. But when he comes back home, he expects to be punished. He expects for his father to be angry at him. He expects that he will have to become his father's servant in order to pay back the money he squandered. But that's not what happens. When his father sees him coming in the distance, his father is there waiting for him with open arms, ready to take him back, embrace him, forgive him, and treat him better than before he left. In fact, the father throws a party! At this point, the moral of the story is that God loves us, and when we ignore him, neglect him, forget him, or even reject him, he always forgives us and is ready to welcome us back to himself with open arms. Certainly a true message and one worthy of letting the whole world know about it. But, for a lot of us sitting in this room, for those of us who have remained faithful, prayerful, devout, nice, for those of us who have tried to live a life that would be pleasing to God, we might be more like the brother than the son. In the context of many of our own lives, we identify more with the Prodigal's sister or brother, than the Prodigal Son. We try and try hard to do the right thing, but it seems like the frivolous rich are getting richer and the hard-working poor are getting poorer. Many of us live somewhere in the middle and are pulled in all kinds of directions!

But this familiar story also involves loss. There is, of course, the loss surrounding the younger son. It begins with a loss, in a way, of the relationship between a father and his son; the younger son was supposed to inherit a small portion of his father's wealth after the father's death. Instead, by asking for his inheritance while the father was alive, he was essentially wishing his father were dead. Then he left home. There was a break in the relationship between the father and the younger son. The younger son, of course, lost everything while he was lost to his father, but at the end of the parable, the break in the relationship is restored; the son who was lost has been found. There is restoration, there is reconciliation, there is healing, and there is forgiveness. We, however, know nothing about whether the younger son received financial restoration, or how his father will deal with his financial status after the party is over. When the father dies, the option of giving the younger son a portion of the inheritance will depend on the generosity of his older brother.

But there is loss also on the part of the older brother. He's the guy who has been doing his part. He stayed with the father, worked for his father like a slave, never disobeyed his command, did all the proper and responsible things. So, it comes as no surprise that he would get a little bent out of shape to see his brother being thrown a lavish party after leaving the family, squandering his inheritance, and then coming back like a dog with his tail between his legs. The older brother didn't appreciate that his younger brother was being treated as though he never left. So, at this point in the story, the older son is lost; there is a break in his relationship with the father, and he is emotionally lost because of the treatment his brother is getting. He, like the Pharisees and scribes to whom this parable was addressed, did not think the sinner deserved welcome. He didn't want the father rubbing elbows with the sinful son; the Pharisees and scribes didn't think Jesus or any other upstanding Jew ought to be associating with tax collectors and sinners.

What bothered the older son was that his father did not act in the way he expected; the father did not react in the way the son thought he should. If the son had been the father, he might have said, "Get out of my face. You wished I were dead, you took your inheritance, and now you're coming back expecting me to welcome you back and let you mooch off of me and your brother. Go away! You're dead to me." Perhaps that would have been the reaction of the younger son had he been the father's place. But the father acted, not by the principle of the world's economy, but by the principle of God's economy. The father acted out of compassion, love, and mercy.

This parable calls to live out the principles, not of the world's economy, but of God's. This parable invites us to be stretched. It invites us to do the unexpected thing: to welcome the stranger, to be open to new possibilities, to broaden our imaginations as to how God can move in our lives and in the lives of others, to consider the variety of ways the God can give us new revelations about himself—new ways to love the other, new ways to love one another. This parable invites us not to become unnerved when things play out in unexpected ways, but instead to step back and try to see how God might be moving in our midst, how God might be trying to transform us into something better and greater.

At any point in our lives, we could be any character in the gospel lesson. We could be the younger son, after squandering his inheritance,

asking for forgiveness and mercy. We could be the father needing to open our arms of compassion and love toward forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal. We could be the older son struggling to handle an unexpected event in our lives, paying more attention to the things that distract us, failing to nurture valuable relationships with each other, or letting personal pride or feelings get in the way of moving forward toward a greater good. Or, we could be the Pharisee or scribe, placing rules and traditions above nurturing relationships between human beings.

This parable is perfect for the Season of Lent. This parable is a lesson in God's economy. It reminds us that we are all imperfect. We don't always get it right. We make mistakes, we make errors in judgment, we squander our inheritance, but in the end, God is always there to take us back, to welcome us with open arms, to accept our repentance, to meet us where we are and say, "You belong here. Welcome back. Try again." Amen.

Resources

The Working Preacher, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1579

The Working Preacher, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2788

"Prodigal Grace, <https://modernmetanoia.org/2019/03/18/lent-4c-prodigal-grace/>