

God's Economy

Ash Wednesday Homily

Sardis Baptist and Sardis Presbyterian Churches

2-10-2016

Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21

The 1990s gave us lots of things: grunge rock, flannel shirts, the real entry into the Internet era, and of course, Seinfeld – a television show that explored life's little contradictions and dilemmas: "What is the deal with..."

In one of my favorite episodes, George, Jerry and Kramer visit a pizzeria to buy a few slices. It's lunch counter style. You pay for your order at the register. As George pays for his order, he waits for just the right time to put his tip into the tip jar. "I just want to make sure the waitress sees me," he says to Kramer and Jerry. George waits and waits, and finally he goes for it, but at the exact moment he deposits a folded bill in the tip jar, the waitress turns her back. Flustered and anxious, George reaches back into the tip jar to grab his bill – "I just want her to see me," he tells his friends. Only just at the moment he does this, the waitress turns back around, and says, "Hey, are you trying to steal my tips?"

Poor George, he can't win. He just wants credit for his generosity.

Well I can't say I blame him. The truth is, I think we're all a little like George. When we are charitable, it's really nice when people take notice. When we go to an extraordinary long church service, or pray so hard we become fatigued, or spend a week of summer vacation on a mission trip, we'd kind of like a pat on the back for the effort. When we fast or give something up, it'd be nice if someone said: "Good job. I am proud of you!"

But there's a tension. Charity and piety cease to remain charity and piety when they are practiced only for recognition and reward. And so we seek to strike that perfect balance between humility and pride.

In tonight's text, Jesus explores this tension.

Stanley Saunders writes that the economy of Jesus's time was a patronage system. Every part of life – social, financial, political, religious – everything hinged on a balance of debt and obligation. Everyone lived in Caesar's household. Caesar had wealthy clients, who were patrons to their own clients, who were patrons to another set of clients, and on down throughout the system. A person's status hinged on public giving to and public praising of patrons. You've heard the expression that if a tree falls in the forest, and nobody's around to see it, it never really fell at all. In first century Palestine, an act of charity that was not seen publicly was one that might as well have never happened. It was wasted. It was of no value.

From the moment of his baptism, Jesus refused to participate in the patronage system. Saunders writes that Jesus pledged his whole allegiance to God, and in so doing, declared social, political, economic, and religious bankruptcy from the establishment.

In this text, and in fact, the whole of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is imploring us to do the same. Jesus says, "Don't live like you are keeping score. Caesar's world is based on relationships that get you things: votes, wealth, status, fine linens, fancy homes, and trumpeting salutes. But the Kingdom of Heaven, God's world, it's based on a real relationship: a love between Creator and created. And we must live in a way that makes God our primary focus."

Jesus says, “Don’t practice acts of kindness to win favor with God. Be kind and offer charity to others, because when you do, you participate in God’s economy – a fellowship whose currency is dignity and respect. By honoring each of God’s created and beloved, you honor God. And the feeling you get when you do, will be more than enough.”

Jesus says, “Don’t give with two hands. That is, don’t pull your billfold out with your right hand, and count the money you are gonna give with your left hand. Give out of your abundance, because God will offer us enough. There was manna in the wilderness, and there will be manna for us too.”

Jesus says, “No need to be all puffed up when you pray. Meet God with sincerity and simplicity. Don’t worry about what other people think you should say when you pray, and don’t worry if they can hear you. Tell God what’s on your mind. Perhaps the newspapers will never declare your righteousness. But you will be in communication with your Creator. You will be better attuned to God’s calling for your life.”

Jesus says, “Don’t fast for attention. This act of devotion is not to be displayed like a badge of honor. Instead, go about your business as usual. God will take notice.”

Jesus says, “Do not store up treasures here on earth. This world teaches you that everything is a commodity, finite and scarce, and we must snatch up and hoard commodities while we can. Not so! Your treasure is in God. And God is not a commodity, something to be captured or hoarded. Spend your time in pursuit of an authentic relationship with God, for in such a relationship, you’ll discover all the treasure you’ll ever need.”

Jesus says to all those who will listen: stop participating in Caesar’s economy, and start participating in God’s economy.

Perhaps tonight is our chance. During the season of Lent, there are forty days for us to think about how we can practice the disciplines of charity, prayer, and fasting, how we can make these disciplines instruments of authentic devotion to God, how we can live not for our own glory, but for God's.

We can be participants in God's economy, right now!

But of course, it's easier said than done. Because in the pursuit to bring about God's kingdom, we'll most likely encounter an invisible hand – one that urges us to cling to the privileges of this world's economy, one that snatches our wrist and guides it back into the tip jars of status and honor. This world's got a hold on us.

So what should we do?

I have two suggestions.

First, we can pray the prayer our lection omits. Sandwiched in between Jesus' advice about charity, prayer, and fasting, is Jesus' exhortation that we pray this prayer: "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we verbalize our desire for God's realm to bust into this world, right here and right now. And we prioritize relationship with God over relationship with patronage. We commit ourselves to being partners in God's transforming possibilities.

Second, as we pray this prayer, we can look to the table that stands before us. During this season of Lent, our attempt to be full participants in God's economy may be clumsy at best. We may fail miserably. But at this table, we are reminded of a God who offers us unlimited love and abundant grace. God will parent us through this Lenten journey, and through any wilderness we face.

And so it begins. Like Jesus, we start our approach to Jerusalem. As we turn our hearts toward God, and away from all those things that distract us, we too will feel Caesar's reproach, and we too will have to travel that dark road to Golgotha. But eventually, we too will hear Easter's good news: The stone will be rolled away, and we will proclaim: "Death O Death, Where is thy sting?"

In this transition from darkness to light, in this wait for joy, may we pray with hope and sincerity: "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done." This day and every day.

Amen.