

It's tax season! Or at least it's tax season for those of us who don't want to wait for the last minute. Okay, it's tax season for one or two of us. But you get the picture, tax season is in sight. What that really means is we have to take account. If we've earned a wage for services performed, our employer will send us documentation of the exact amount. We'll also collect all sorts of receipts detailing monies earned from interest, or monies distributed for certain expenses and donations. We'll tally it all up. And on or before April 15th, we'll need to settle up with the IRS. If we owe more taxes than we've paid, we'll send them a check. If they owe us (please Baby Jesus make be it so!), they'll send us a check, though not as promptly as they expect us to send one to them. Regardless, it's a zero-sum-gain. And it's pretty darn predictable. You get what you are entitled to and not a penny more.

I wonder if that's why the whole country goes bonkers over March Madness? On the opposite end of the spectrum, here's an entirely unpredictable event, and in most years, everyone from the players to the coaches to the fans, even the referees, fails to receive what they are entitled to. A top-seeded team can have an off night and be eliminated by an inferior team in an instant. One mistake in the wrong moment of the game can have the effect of ten in less intense moments. In some instances, the team with the statistical advantage in shooting percentage and rebounds will actually end up with fewer points than the other team. A coach with thirty years of experience and hard-earned success can spend an entire career and never make the Final Four. A thirty-year-old coach from a directional school with a .500 record can catch fire and write themselves into history. And best of all, a two-year-old can fill out a bracket, picking winners sheerly based on the names they like the best, and win the office pool. Yeah, it balances, but not on a balance sheet.

The author of Luke's gospel writes about their own time and context, somewhere in the Roman empire in the late first century. But truth be told, this gospel could just as easily have been written in our own time. Luke's world revolves around patronage. There's an intricate system of patron and clients. Patrons provide for the clients in their own little ecosystems, and their clients depend on their provisions. I give you this. Now you are indebted to me. Every patron is also the client of a large patron right on up to the emperor. If a ledger of debits and credits had arms and legs this would be it. In such a world, everyone is preconditioned to

be level, or square, or even. And if you aren't level, square, or even, all of your energy is working to get back to that place in every imaginable relationship.

If this is the system you know, seeking to balance the favor of employer, or householder, or parent, or partner, or friend, or neighbor, or really any relationship, how could you or would you imagine any other kind of relationship with God? Surely, the One who created us must also keep some kind of cosmic ledger, right?!?

"No! Absolutely not!" Luke's author tells us. God is not a finite entity. Therefore, God has no need to operate in a system of checks and balances. God's restorative actions are not beholden to the predictable and limited possibilities of Caesar's.

Last week, Jesus preached to the congregation about a series of blessings and woes. Most of these statements are corporate in nature. The communities that lack provisions, that grieve, that are hungry, that find themselves alienated in the present will be made whole in God's world. The communities that enjoy the artificial abundance of Caesar's world receive their consolation now, but they ought not to expect such imbalance in God's world. If we hear this news with Caesar's ears it's quite jarring. If we hear this news with the ears of Jesus, it's anything but. God's enough-ness and God's re-accounting more than offsets the ledger.

If last week's message focused on corporate action, this week's is a bit more individual and granular. What is our response to those who aggrieve and victimize us? Caesar's world, with ledger at the ready, beckons us to hate those who hate us, abuse those who choose to abuse us, return violence with violence, turn away those who beg from us, because Lord knows you'll never see a return on that investment. But Jesus beckons us to love. Not as an act of weakness, or indifference, or martyrdom. But as an act of power. When you love those who hate you, pray for those who curse you, turn the cheek to those who strike you, and give openly to those who beg of you, you are loosening the binds of the ledger. You may even be ripping it apart. You are choosing to no longer participate in a world that makes every action one of patronage and dependence. You are also choosing not to mimic the very practices that have made you a

victim. You are ending a perpetual chain of violence, and beginning a chain of restoration and healing.

Jesus is also quick to remind us that many of the things we credit ourselves for doing in Caesar's system, our enemies do as well. It's not all that hard to love people who love you. And it's not all that hard to lend money with expectation of receiving some kind of interest. If we're honest, it's also not all that hard to for us to imagine that our enemies love people they love and pursue dealings that benefit their prospects. But imagine the generosity and depth of those who choose to simply love, and give, and offer of themselves, even to those whom they consider enemies. It's the kind of stuff that upsets the ledger. It's also indicative of a God whose love, grace, and possibilities are generous beyond our imagination.

We've been trained to see what systems trains us to see. Strength, power, and resources dictate outcomes, but also serve a measuring stick of value, morality, and capability. When that happens, it's hard to see transcendent outcomes.

Nearly 40 years ago, on the eve of the 1983 national championship, Dave Kindred of the Washington Post wrote:

Trees will tap dance, elephants will drive at Indy and Orson Welles will skip lunch before North Carolina State finds a way to beat Houston in the NCAA's college basketball championship game Monday night.

After a last second dunk, an improbable upset, and too many empty beer cans to count to count on Hillsborough Street in Raleigh, Kindred would write on Tuesday morning: Trees tap-danced, elephants drove at Indy, and Orson Welles skipped lunch.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not comparing a basketball game to the inbreaking of God's realm, anymore than I am suggesting Carolina's win the year prior was evidence of the apocalypse.

I only suggest that the mechanisms and systems of this world often prevent us from seeing the possible. Caesar speaks the word should. Caesar likes

imperatives. There should be a zero at the end of this ledger, and I'm gonna make it so. Gods speaks of what can and will be. "Remember, I'm the God of abundance, not balance," She says. "And besides, I'm not a construct, indivisible, and without value. I'm something that can be shared with everyone, add value to everyone, transform everyone."

Multiply any quantity or entity times Caesar's zero, and you know what you'll get? Zero. Because Caesar has nothing of lasting value to give you. But step into the God's system, based on One, or Oneness, an odd sort of number. No, the ledger doesn't like the number one. But multiply yourself times God's one, and you'll always be you, the whole you, God's you.

In God's world, we really can love our enemies, share our resources, and end the patterns of senseless and stubborn brokenness our systems create. Sure, in today's polarized world such visions seem as likely as tapdancing trees and racecar-driving elephants. But love and hope, expressed in ordinary moments, and offered with consistent repetition are peculiar things. They don't seek zeros, they seek abundance. And it seems to me that anything is possible in God's abundance.

Let's grab our dancing shoes. Maybe the tress, and elephants, and even our enemies will join us.

May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.