

Redefining Wealth

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Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Acts 2:40-47

I.

There are in the bible certain passages that wiser preachers avoid in public. Why make a controversy over the question of whether creation happened in seven days? And then there's what happened after Pentecost. We set aside one Sunday for Pentecost—that was last week! We chat about people being able to understand each other, tongues of fire etc. But then we move gracefully on to other themes, and bypass the really controversial bits. We miss where they sold off their property, providing for every one's needs! Let me read the Bob Bratcher translation again.

All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed. Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.

How many of you were raised in churches where this passage was a major thrust of the teaching? Just curious. Were you taught to take it literally as a contemporary requirement of the gospel? I wasn't.

We can almost hear the “hrumph cough well...” As one friend recently said: “It's easier to give it all away if you believe the world is going to end in a few days”. She knew many early Christians thought Jesus was returning in very short order! She may be right.

It is a natural reaction to want to defend ourselves from a bible passage that seems to suggest sacrificing those precious twin idols, private property and economic self-interest. We live in a society built on the assumption that **what is good for me is automatically good for us**. When we read about sharing all things in common, it is natural to laugh it off, or pooh-pooh the picture as impractical, unsustainable. We immediately go, in our minds and souls, to the uncomfortable aspects of having to share all things in common. And yet... that kind of discomfort isn't what we find in Acts!

What we find is an amazing dynamic group of people operating on the radical assumption that there is plenty to support every one among them. We see people who have been transformed by the experience of community in the Spirit-- compassion and love and understanding where once they were strangers. Trust has taken the place of transaction! Simple hospitality and care have taken the place of self-protection and consumption. These are people who have been personally transformed. They are willing to do whatever it takes to care for their neighbors, their fellow members in community. They are confident in the abundance of a God who is going to care for them come what may.

So the truly uncomfortable question for you and me in 2011 is this: what would it take by way of a spiritual transformation to turn folk today into the kind of people those Jerusalem Jesus freaks were? What journey of the soul, or experience of the spirit would it take to start a movement today— where folk gather in community with glad and simple hearts, eating together, sharing together, doing whatever it takes to make sure everyone has enough?

II.

Come with me now, to our other controversy. In a world all caught up in the pursuit of economic growth by self-interested capitalism, it's time we take back the *story of creation*. This story has been hijacked, turned into a pseudo-scientific reading, a literal account of creation in seven days. That reading does violence to the poetry of the story. And it misses the point. For starters, it misses the profound insight that all of creation needs *rest* as well as *work* to thrive and be creative! The Sabbath portion is the underpinning for some of the world's most ancient labor laws—laws that protected the right to rest from work!

At every stage, God looks and sees that creation it is good! God takes pride in creation, loves creation, cherishes creation. God make it abundant, teeming with life. There is enough for all. Verses 29 to 31 shows a blessing, affirming loving relationship with a plentiful and interconnected world...

God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. ³¹God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

When God creates human beings in this story, God doesn't just tell them to do whatever they like. God puts humans in a caretaking relationship, within this beautiful order being spoken out of chaos. We have roles, we have relationships, we have responsibility. And, there is *enough*....there is enough for all to live in harmony. *

We need to go back and listen to some ancient bards with fresh ears, hear the song of a God who spoke the cosmos into being, created humans squarely in the midst of an abundant and beautiful creation in which we are responsible stewards and partners. We need to go back and ask ourselves the question: do we buy into the God of an economic "invisible hand" favoring our own unenlightened pursuit of wealth, or do we listen to the ancient songs that tell us of an abundant creation, a wealthy shared inheritance in which we have a crucial role?

III.

So what does the beautiful elegant story of creation have to do with the other reading, the one from Acts? Here it is: we need to start to redefine wealth! We need to reclaim a religious heritage that says our wealth is not to be found in the pursuit of self-interest alone, but rather in the depth of our investment in God's good green earth and the well-being of our sisters and brothers, both fellow community members and strangers and even, if we take Jesus seriously, the well-being of our enemies!

Many of you live already by the light of such a vision, the melody of such a song. This church is full of people who have made choices over the years to serve your neighbors, and the collective wellbeing of your community, not simply yourself. So have many many others. I have a son making his way into Kansas City Missouri today. He begins orientation for a teaching position in Special Education; he doesn't know where he will live, or whom he will serve. But he shares a foolhardy trust that Somebody is there to take care of him and make him able. In this he is just like many of you here in this room. God is pleased with you. There *is* One who looks on you and says "This is very good."

And yet now is the time to get evangelistic and zealous with the world around us. Everyone is not ready to share it all, as needed. Everyone is not interested in cherishing creation. Being sacrificed on the altar of self-interest is enforcement of North Carolina clean air laws, along with education funding, along

with the racial justice act just passed by our legislature a little while ago. Vetoes are being overridden and the hour is very late. The way ahead looks arduous.

Still, it is not too late to pose a fundamental question to our neighbors! What do you really believe? Do you believe we all just need to watch out for number one? Or do we have a common interest? Do we or do we not have a responsibility to care for creation? Ask your Christian neighbors.

Ask them if they have read Genesis 1 lately, and whether “dominion” means care for the land and the air and the water, or it means violation, poisoning and neglect. Ask them: do you really trust the companies you work for to do that caring, and care for you, without public oversight? Oh, and do you still believe in the conviction of your Carolinian forebears, that it is the right of every human child of God to have access to decent free education? Is this or is it not part of making sure every one at the table has enough?

Underlying all these *evangelical* questions for our Christian neighbors lies this fundamental query: Do we think there is enough? Are we willing to risk a little personally on the proposition that God is an abundant God? OR do we want Dog eat Dog for the law of the land? And just how does that square with the Bible?

IV.

The movement of communal care and radical hospitality that got a jumpstart on Pentecost is alive today. We know sisters and brothers in faith who make sacrifices every day, to give to and care for others, not on the strength of hollow duty nor out of guilt, but moved by the grace of an abundant loving God. They respond with everything, to make sure there is enough to go around.

There are little intentional communities in virtually every city and in many rural communities—all kinds of theology, but one love, one sense of desire to share it all. There are Anabaptist communities and Catholic communities, and some that forswear all labels. And there are also some of us who choose not to live in close residential community but in open community, churches like Binkley Baptist Church.

Regardless of our locations, it is a good day today to turn to our maker once again, to hear the echoing voice of the One who made us *all* in the divine image! It is a good day to get intentional about sharing the abundance of the wealth we receive from God.

Hear these words and live: *Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude.*² *And on the seventh day God finished the work that God had done, and rested on the seventh day from all the work that God had done.*³ *So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.* You and I are living on the seventh day. There is a great Sabbath feast laid out before us, already prepared. The only question is whom we invite, and whether we are ready to care for the other guests. It is indeed, a very very good day.

**For the record, while I am getting in trouble here, let me state that I do see a tension between the biblical account of creation and a simplistic view of evolution! And it isn't about how long creation took or when it happened. It is the tension between an ancient writer trying to describe co-existence in a beautiful abundant world, asserting a benevolent curve to creation, and a nineteenth century Darwinian view of competition and elimination under stress as the central features of evolutionary development. But if we take ALL of Darwin seriously, and we take seriously the scientific evolution of theories of evolution, and centuries of environmental evidence of a humanity gone mad in pursuit of our own interests, then we find ourselves in the situation humans are in today!*