



Is there anything wrong with buying a loaf of bread?

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, November 11, 2007 at Christ Church, Detroit. RCL Readings: Haggai 1:15b – 2:9; Psalm 145:5, 18-22; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5 3-17; and Luke 20:27-38.

Douglas Meeks of Vanderbilt, once began a lecture by asking, “Is there anything wrong with buying a loaf of bread?” He got a lot of blank faces. He then suggested the audience live with the question and return to it later, so you might do the same. “Is there anything wrong with buying a loaf of bread?” Just put it in parentheses and we’ll come back to it.

The New Testament speaks of the economy of God. In its ancient sense it concerns what it takes to live and to live abundantly. Until relatively recent times it meant “Will everyone in the household have enough to live? Will everyone survive the day, and perhaps even flourish?” (God the Economist, p. 2)

Household or home is the place where, as Robert Frost said in “The Death of the Hired Man, “...where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” Meeks would add some additional characteristics. It is the place where, like Cheers, “everybody knows your name,” and they know your story, your hopes and dreams. “It is where you can count on being confronted, forgiven, cared for, and loved...where you can always count on there being a place for you at the table...and...you can reckon on what is on the table being shared with you.” Economy, the management of the household, is a life and death issue, and home, which is to say participation in the economy of the household, means access to the conditions of life. The modern science of economics as it emerged in the late 19th century has lost sight of the original question. Economics today concerns the law of supply and demand and assumes that the household or community exists to serve the economy rather than the other way around. So for Christians, participants in the economy of God, it raises a question. Should the distribution of all goods be subject to market logic? Does the gospel have anything to say to this?

The Bible opens in the first chapter of Genesis with the story of God’s abundance in the creation and ordering of the world. You all know the story. God said, “Let there be light” and kaboom! There it was. Day by day God reviews the day’s accomplishments; day and night, sun and moon, earth and sky, land and water, fruit trees and vegetation, birds and fish, cattle and creeping things and pronounces them “Good,” and at last, with the creation of humankind, God says with great glee “It is *very* good.” God is so extravagant and so overflowing with abundance that when all is finished God takes a day off. So the very first story of the Bible is one that testifies to God’s generosity and abundance.

As we continue through Genesis our ancestors were nomads, roaming the Middle East with flocks and herds and all was shared. In times of plenty all shared in the bounty and in times of want all shared the sacrifice. And then we come to the 47th chapter, and the sky darkens.

In the 47th chapter Pharaoh has a dream. He dreams there will be a famine, and he goes into overdrive. He seeks to control and monopolize the food supply, and he introduces into the household of God the fear of scarcity. For the first time we have someone who sets out to get everything he can lay his hands on for himself because he is afraid of scarcity. He begins by hiring Joseph to oversee it all. Joseph as you may remember was the obnoxious little showoff with the fancy coat whose brothers were so fed up they sold him to a caravan of Midianites. Joseph, the interpreter of dreams, goes from prisoner to prime minister in the blink of an eye. Joseph at the advanced age of 30 becomes the steward of all Egypt. And what happens?

Things get worse. All of the grain of the region is now stockpiled in Egypt. When people come for grain to bake bread Joseph asks them for collateral, so they give up their land and their tools for food. And the next year when they are asked for collateral they surrender their livestock, and in the third year with nothing else left to exchange they surrender themselves. It was an economic transaction. They sold themselves into slavery for bread. Before long Pharaoh owns all the land except for that belonging to the priests because says Meeks he needs them to bless him.

So what happens to them while they're in slavery? They multiply. Even in their captivity, Pharaoh is no match for God's abundance. Like pests the Hebrews become so numerous that Pharaoh orders Shiprah and Puah to kill all the newborn boys. Someone pointed out that we have no idea what Pharaoh's name is but we know the names of those two midwives. In an act of civil disobedience they disregarded Pharaoh's order to kill the babies of the Hebrews. Because of them, Hebrew women steadily continue to bear children and the names of those midwives have survived century after century to this day. Finally, Pharaoh becomes so frustrated at his inability to control them he calls for Moses and Aaron and orders them to pack up their people and get out of Egypt.

And so it is that God's abundance trumps Pharaoh's scarcity. And when our ancestors cross the sea and find themselves in the wilderness an astonishing thing happens. God rains bread down upon them. And they say "manna" which in Hebrew means "What is it?" Most of us were taught manna meant bread, but it first meant "What is it?" Never before had they experienced bread as a gift they couldn't own, control, predict or plan for. There are several interesting things to note in this tale. First, everybody had enough. Just imagine, *everybody had enough!* Secondly, because they had learned about scarcity in Egypt they tried to stockpile the manna and it didn't work. It spoiled. They discover God's generosity and extravagance cannot be stored. Third, Moses invites them to observe the Sabbath. What is significant and amazing about the Sabbath is that inherent in the *observance* of the Sabbath is the acknowledgement there is enough. They do not have to go out to work that day because they have enough. If you believe in scarcity you cannot take a day off. You can't even slow down much because you *want* more and more, your family wants more and more, and you may even think you *need* more and more, even though, if you have embraced the myth of scarcity, you will never have enough. The myth of scarcity breeds despair.

Now, if bread is the primary symbol for what it means to have access to the basic conditions of life what does it mean to turn it into a commodity? This is what Pharaoh did. Until that time bread was shared. All had the same access to the basic conditions of life. This is what Meeks is asking us to think about when he asks "Is there anything wrong with buying a loaf of bread?" What does it mean when access to the basic conditions of life becomes a commodity?

In considering God's economy we asked should the distribution of all goods be subject to market logic, and does the gospel have anything to say to this? The story of bread tells us that there are certain social goods that should be distributed according to a *different* logic because they are not commodities. For instance, healing does not lend itself very well to the logic of the market – which may be why we don't seem able to come up with a health care plan we can live with. In scripture we're told again and again to extend hospitality. The very word "hospital" originated in the church's practice of hospitality to the sick, the lame, the stranger, the poor, the sojourner and the homeless. The church said they should be given belonging, sustenance and care; they should be given access to the basic conditions of life, even when they have nothing to exchange. And yet we now live in a market economy in which hospitals refuse care to the very people they were *created* to serve.

And the problem is not that the market is bad. In fact it works quite well for the distribution of commodities. The problem is that modern economics has obscured the original understanding of economy. Economy exists to serve the community, to serve the household, and not the other way around. What the gospel brings to the conversation is the understanding that in God's economy, in the management of God's household, those things that are necessary for life cannot be commodities and *only* commodities. "...food, housing, health care, jobs and education" cannot be subject only to the logic of the market, and "such social goods as justice, security, belonging, respect, affection and grace should not be distributed in *any* sense according to the logic of exchanging commodities. Otherwise, it is inevitable that those with nothing to exchange will be refused participation in the household and denied access to the most basic conditions of life."(p. 5)

Now for a story, there was a man who had been caught and taken to this judge's court because he'd stolen a loaf of bread.

When the judge investigated, he found out that the man had no job, and his family was hungry. He had tried unsuccessfully for some time to get work; and finally to feed his family he'd stolen a loaf of bread.

Although recognizing the extenuating circumstances, the judge first said, "I'm sorry, but the law can make no exceptions. You are guilty of theft. Therefore I must order you to pay a fine of 10 dollars."

The judge then continued, however, saying, "But I want to pay the fine myself." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a 10 dollar bill, and handed it to the man

As soon as the man took the money, the judge then said, "Now I also want to remit the fine." That is, the man could keep the money. "Furthermore," he said, "I am going to ask the bailiff to pass the hat around to everyone in this courtroom, and I'm fining everyone in this courtroom 50 cents for living in a city where a man has to steal in order to have bread to eat."

The money was then collected and given to the defendant.

We live in a consumer society that tells us we always need more. We will never have enough. Pharaoh has a long reach and our society has been corrupted by the myth of scarcity. It is not that God has not provided enough to go around. It is that some people have more than enough and more

than their fair share. Bill Tully at St. Bart's in New York is quoted as saying the problem is not that the church doesn't have enough money. The problem is that it is still in our pockets.

Today is the United Thank Offering Ingathering, in which we are invited to remember all we have to be thankful for. Next Sunday is Commitment Sunday. We hope you will bring in your pledge cards, and we will list those we receive in the Chronicles to recognize and thank you all. I hope that over the past two weeks since I first spoke to the matter of stewardship you have been counting your blessings, checking your tax returns, doing the math, playing with numbers and possibilities, and practicing gratitude. I hope you will increase your pledge to the church as a matter of discipline because where your treasure is there will your heart be also. And if you increase your giving you will deepen your faith; you will act your way into new ways of thinking. Two weeks ago I suggested you visit the Global Rich web site to see exactly where you fit in the world economy. In case you haven't gotten around to it, here is what it will tell you. If your household income is \$150,000 a year then 99.7% of the earth's population is poorer than you are. If it is \$100,000 then you are wealthier than 99.3% of the human community, and at \$50,000 you are wealthier than 99.2% of the world. It's probably safe to say that most of us have more than enough.

So my prayer is that you will give generously in the year ahead, not because the church needs the money but because we need to give, and because we have been blessed beyond measure with resources some of which God intends for others, because it's important for the well-being of our souls, and because the household of God, and its mission and ministry, are entrusted to all its members.

Sources

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Meeks, M. Douglas, [The Economy of Grace and the Market Logic.](#) Note: This paper contains some of the themes developed in his book, "*God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy*" Minneapolis: Fortress Press. Other ideas in the lectures are found in "*Spreading the Lord's Table: The Church in the Global Market Economy.*"

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