

Faithful Economy
Based on Psalm 133 and Acts 4: 32-35
Rev. Dr. Nicole Wilkinson
Cape May Presbyterian Church
April 14, 2024

This is not a sermon about religion and politics. There's one brewing, just so you're forewarned, but it needs more time to ferment. I'm saving it for later. This is not a sermon about religion and politics; it's a sermon about religion and economics. Honestly, as much as Jesus talked about rich and poor, money and salvation, I should be up here three out of four Sundays giving sermons about religion and economics.

You may not want me telling me what to do with your money, and I wouldn't blame you. But surely we all need to listen to what *Jesus* tells us to do with our money.

A few examples— Remember the story of the rich man and Lazarus, where the beggar Lazarus goes to be with Abraham when he dies, while the the rich man goes to burn in Hades? There's the saying, "Do not lay up treasures on earth, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Or, "You cannot serve both God and Mammon."

"Give to him who asks of you."

"Sell everything you have and give the money to the poor."

"Blessed are the poor." And my personal favorite: "It's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

We'll get back to those at some point. But the passages we're talking about this morning aren't any of these teachings of Jesus. We're talking about one passage from the Hebrew scripture and one from the New Testament—both of which deal, in different ways, with what it means to live in community.

By the way, a nerd moment: the word "economy" is from the Greek word *oikonomia*—*oikos* meaning house or household, and *nomos* meaning rule or law. The rule of the household is the economy. It's the way the household is arranged to work, in other words.

Psalm 133, a short and sweet psalm, says pretty simply—it's good to live in community. It's good to live in harmony together. Now it's true that the analogy

the psalm uses to make it clear just how good that living in harmony is—well it loses a little something in translation.

How very good and pleasant it is

when kindred live together in unity! [we're with the psalmist so far]

² It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard, [wait, what?]
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.

Uh, ok...sounds...messy. Also like the beginning of a stain remover commercial. Pouring oil on someone's head, so that it runs down into a man's beard and collar—this is just not something we do, and if it somehow happened, we wouldn't like it. But I think for the psalmist, it's a kind of luxury. Oil, mostly olive oil, was for moisturizer, for refreshing the skin in a very dry climate. So if you had an abundance of oil poured over your head---I guess you could think of it like a whole lot of bubbles in your bubble bath. Or like a good hot shower when you're dirty and tired. Or a plunge in the ocean on a hot summer's day. Luxurious, refreshing, restorative.

That's what living in harmony is like—restorative. Something that revives you when everyday dust and fatigue wear you down. Living in community, and doing it well, doing it with consideration, in harmony—it's a good life, in other words. Good enough to write a psalm about.

But the passage from the Book of Acts takes it further. We not only hear that it's good to live in community, we see how people did it in the earliest gatherings of Christians. People drawn together by their belief in Jesus' resurrection. People who had that strong bond because they were pretty much the only people in the world who believed in Jesus' resurrection. The way they lived in harmony was, they took care of each other. They pooled their resources and made sure every one of them was ok. To put it in kindergarten terms, they shared.

I have a friend who once was nanny to three toddlers—a set of 3 year old twins and a three and a half year old who had been adopted just around the time mom got pregnant with the twins. One of those stories. My friend, their nanny, used to tell this story of how the grownups were trying to teach the kids to share, at the earliest possible age. So when they were fighting over a toy, the mom or the nanny would be telling them, remember, we share! Now, you know that lesson takes a very long time to sink in. Maybe a lifetime. So for a while there two of the kids would be

trying to grab a toy from each other and one would start screaming at the other one, “we share!!”

I had a similar experience with my niece, who, at about that same age, saw me beginning to peel an orange for myself and came running over saying brightly, “should we share?” Well, I wasn’t planning on it, I thought.

Maybe that’s level one in the process of learning to share. Level one is: you share with me. That’s what we are able to learn at age 3. Sharing is good when you’re the one being shared with. That has a lot more appeal and is so much more accessible than, say, level two: we share with each other. Not to mention level four or five: I share with you.

But actually, this is how human economies originated. The first economies were not bartering, they were sharing.¹ Anthropologists call it a gift economy. You give to your neighbor when they’re in need and they or someone else gives to you when you are in need. You don’t give to someone in need *because* they gave to you. You’re not paying them back. You give because they are in need, and because you can. Because it’s part of what we sometimes call the social contract, the unspoken agreements of what it means to be a part of a community.

One thing that doesn’t happen in that kind of economy, is you don’t identify some people as producers or givers or philanthropists and other people as “the needy.” Let’s face it, in our society, it is never any fun to be “the needy.” In our society there is shame in being poor, in needing help—people feel shame in that situation, much as we may wish they did not. And whether or not someone is truly needy is a matter of suspicion for those who consider themselves givers. Are they needy, or lazy? Needy or just milking the system?

The Acts passage says the early Christian community had no needy people. There was a gift economy, and in that system, no one is labeled needy. Everyone has needs and those needs are met by the community. Imagine what that must be like. No one is “needy.” Everyone is ok.

Surely there are ways we can get a little bit closer to that kind of economy. It seems as though it’s been done, on a small scale. Surely it’s possible to do it on a large scale? Or to do it on a billion small scales?

¹ I highly recommend David Graeber’s book *Debt: The First Five Thousand Years* on this subject!

Recently, I found myself saying to each of my kids, separately, “you know I don’t want to have to lean on you, financially or emotionally, as I get older.” I’m sure many of you have had this conversation with your adult children, or some version of it. And each of my sons said, “but we owe you for the twenty some years we’ve been leaning on you!” Which is lovely, I guess, but my gut response was, where did I go wrong that you think that’s how this works? You don’t owe me. I’m not keeping a ledger. I’m your mother! It’s not about who gave what to whom when. It’s about the quality of the relationship.

Surely that’s how relationships within the Christian community are supposed to work? The reason the book of Acts tells us the story of the early church’s economy, is because that story is foundational. It teaches us by example how we take care of each other as church members and church people living in a larger community. Quite simply, we share.

It isn’t charity. It isn’t charity any more than raising children is charity. It isn’t charity, it’s relationship. It’s life with other people. It isn’t even an obligation; it’s a condition of living in a human society, a condition we don’t always acknowledge.

If someone falls down in front of you outside those doors, you’re not likely to say, well I already helped someone today. You’re not going to consult your ledger and say, well, I’ve already paid off all the good anyone ever did for me just at the moment, so I owe you no care whatsoever. No. You’re going to try and help get the fallen person get back on their feet, one way or another. Maybe this is a good analogy for an older congregation, because we are all aware, the next person who falls could easily be us.

As Christians we ought to be living as though our social contract still were the one we see in Acts. Where no one is “needy.” Where each of us is the helper and the one needing help, just depending on the moment. Where every one can be ok, and no one’s needs are shoved aside, because we are all part of a whole community.