

“Pay Attention to the Great Economy!”
Reflections on Luke 12:13-34, Earth Cosmology and Sabbath Economics

A Talk Delivered to the Forum on Faith, Economy and Ecology:
Moving beyond growth to a sustainable Earth community
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By Ched Myers

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I.

In the Fall 2003 issue of *Business Ethics* a thoughtful opinion piece appeared by progressive journalist William Greider (*right*). In a preview of his book *The Soul of Capitalism: Opening Paths to a Moral Economy*, Greider wrote:



Most Americans, I am convinced, have a sense that something is wrong in the contours of [our] supposed prosperity... The hunger is unnamed, and seems part of what the system demands. The only remedy, we are told, is more. More output, more cost savings, and still more sacrifices to achieve them... **The operating principles of capitalism have become dangerously obsolete. The house of economics is due for major renovation, if not a complete tear-down...**

Americans [have been] deeply educated -- and angered -- by the boom-and-bust stock market which revealed a lot about how Wall Street manages their money. The injured public still has a smoldering anger that could be mobilized for a more aggressive era of reform.

Above all, we need a new narrative of American capitalism.... The economy of more has turned upon itself, tearing the social fabric and weakening family and community life, piling up discontents alongside the growing plenty. We need a new story...

As it presently functions, capitalism encourages human pathologies -- embodying irresponsibility as a central requirement in its operating routines. **But a new narrative beyond more is beginning to emerge organically within capitalism.** Central to this story is the fact that people themselves can make change, despite the inertia of government and the overbearing power of established economic interests. **Pioneers in many sectors are showing the way to dismantle or reengineer the status quo.**

Greider's analysis was prescient. The current crisis of our financial markets is only deepening both trends he identified. On one hand, disillusionment and anxiety is deepening; on the other, creative alternatives are proliferating.

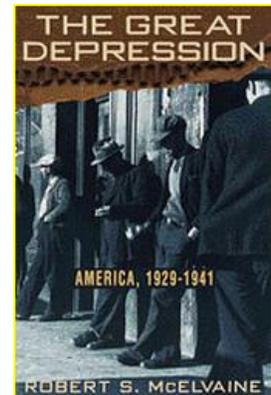
This gathering is an important reflection of those trends, and I commend the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns for convening it. Friends, you are the pioneers



who are building capacity for the movement to “dismantle or re-engineer” the economic status quo. We gather in the knowledge that, as the experience of Jubilee 2000 showed, we are more than the sum of our parts if we decide to organize, educate and collaborate strategically. Fifteen years ago, no one imagined that a faith-activated popular movement would be able to tackle the complex issues of the global debt crisis. But what grew out of conversations like this weekend was one of the most significant campaigns for economic justice in the last

quarter century, which so many in this room were a part of. We should take inspiration from the legacy of Jubilee 2000. At the same time, none of us could have imagined ten years ago that the crisis of structural indebtedness we were addressing internationally would also bring our domestic economy to its knees in 2008. So the tasks we face are truly daunting.

Great Depression historian Robert McElvaine wrote recently that the current economic meltdown “isn't an exact replay of the Great Depression, but it's a pretty good rhyme. Economists, business leaders and policymakers have all been ignoring the lessons learned from that 20th century calamity.”¹ The question is, of course, what lessons do we need to learn here?



I believe that everyone gathered here agrees that the challenges we face are far more profound than the public conversation is allowing. The crisis we face is civilizational, calling for deeper engagement than mere policy tinkering or reform around the edges. Greider is right—the *economic story* into which we've been socialized, and around which our culture is organized, is deeply flawed. We need a new narrative.

Now for people of faith, this represents what we might call an “evangelical opening.” Since the triumph of Enlightenment secularism, managerial capitalism has tended to ignore or coopt the resources offered by our theological and moral traditions. Today, however, more people are realizing that this crisis demands nothing less than revisiting the foundations of our social vision. It is thus no accident that, at the same time Greider's book was being published in the U.S., the World Alliance of Reformed Churches gathered in Accra, Ghana, to issue an historic declaration. Of

¹ “Their Party Crashed. Ours May Too.” *Washington Post*, 9/28/08, B2.

the many ecclesial statements about economic justice, this one is worth paying attention to, no matter what one's denominational background. It stated in part:

The root causes of massive threats to life are above all the product of an unjust economic system defended and protected by political and military might. Economic systems are a matter of life or death... This crisis is directly related to the development of neoliberal economic globalization... an ideology that claims to be without alternative, demanding an endless flow of sacrifices from the poor and creation. It makes false promises... claiming sovereignty over life and demanding total allegiance, which amounts to idolatry...



We believe that any economy of the household of life, given to us by God's covenant to sustain life, is accountable to God. We believe the economy exists to serve the dignity and well being of people in community, within the bounds of the sustainability of creation. We believe that human beings are called to choose God over Mammon... Therefore we reject any ideology or economic regime that puts profits before

people, does not care for all creation, and privatizes those gifts of God meant for all. We reject any teaching which justifies those who support, or fail to resist, such an ideology in the name of the gospel. ²

It is sadly true that, to paraphrase Jesuit John Haughey, our churches have for too long read the gospel as if there we didn't participate in an economy, and we have participated in the economy as if there were no gospel. But this is changing, and increasingly there are Christians who see economics as, in the words of the Accra document, a "confessional issue."

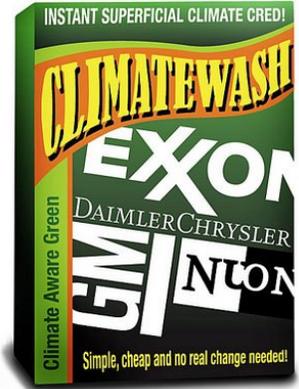
In the meantime, another related stream of conscientization has been growing among faith communities in the face of our deepening ecological crisis. While we should certainly admit that our churches are late coming to the party, we should also recognize that environmental concerns have developed more traction in First World communities of faith than any other single social issue over the past 15 years. Who would have thought that global warming would be a hot button issue for evangelicals? The literature on the many dimensions of ecotheology has exploded, ecumenical organizations doing policy advocacy and education are proliferating, and perhaps most importantly, countless local congregations are trying to engage issues such as reducing their environmental footprint and participating in local habitat preservation.

² From: "Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth." World Alliance of Reformed Churches 24th General Council, Accra, Ghana, July 30-Aug 13, 2004.

Of course along with popularity comes dilution and deception, and we are now awash in the seductive discourse of corporate greenwashing. Our churches too often settle for tokenistic nods to earth spirituality with no depth of social analysis or political point of engagement. Again, our religious communities do not yet fully recognize how deeply we need to change the story we are in.

The good news is, people of the Book have a lot to bring to the conversation about a new economic and ecological story — wisdom older and wiser than the predatory fantasies of turbo capitalism. As Native American novelist Leslie Silko puts it, “Stories are all we have to save us from illness and death.” But we ourselves need to recover that wisdom, which has long been pushed to the margins of our traditions.

For the last 15 years I have been exploring a theology and practices of what I call “the biblical vision of Sabbath Economics,” a project inspired in large part by collaboration with the historic Jubilee 2000 campaign. In the spirit of that



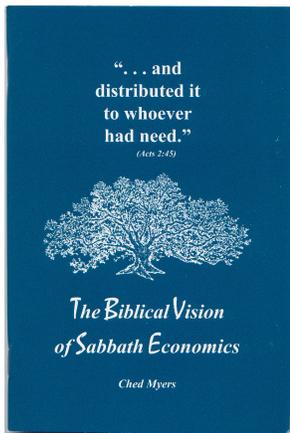
ongoing project, this morning I want to look at a text from Luke’s gospel which addresses exactly this gathering’s twin concerns about economic justice and ecological sustainability. In order to set these reflections firmly in a real world context, however, let me make two conceptual points concerning the roots of our current crisis as we begin our conversations. While these are broad generalizations, I find them enormously useful as focalizers.

The global economic realities we are facing, and with which we will be grappling in the next 48 hours, are difficult and complex. The danger of overemphasizing this complexity, however, is that we become overwhelmed and disempowered, turning us into spectators of a cosmic drama we can neither comprehend nor

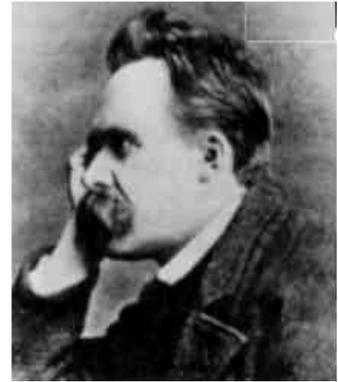
engage. This is in fact the perception of most folk, in both church and society, which is why so much economic and ecological pillaging has continued politically unchecked.

In the midst of current debates it is easy lose sight of the forest for the trees. If we are to change the story, we’ll need to remind ourselves that there is a time to make complicated things simple. Not *simplistic*, as in the fairy tale versions of economics we get from the popular media. Rather, we need to practice the Quaker discipline of “speaking plainly.” So let me try this: **What is flawed about the dominant economic and ecological story is that it has slowly but surely transformed economic exchange from something that was supposed to serve social and ecological relationships to something that now demands the sacrifice of social and ecological relationships.** Capital has replaced community as the center of our economic story.

This is no mere bumpersticker sloganeering. It summarizes the conclusions of many thoughtful economic philosophers, two of whom I’ll mention here. As you know, modern capitalism achieved hegemony in the 19th century through processes of industrialization and urbanization that resulted in unprecedented social



displacement and environmental destruction. One of the many European intellectuals who were trying to understand this “brave new world” was the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, and his way of articulating the dilemma continues to be instructive. In 1887 Tönnies (*right*) made a basic distinction between what he called the “integrating” force of traditional *Gemeinschaft* (Community)—kinship, ethnicity, religion, and even locality--and the dis-integrating, instrumentalist forces of *Gesellschaft* (Capitalist Society). He defined Community as “everything that holds human relationships together despite all that would pull them apart.” Capitalism, in turn, represented “everything that would pull human relationships apart despite all that holds them together.” Tönnies saw that the modern market economy, and the state apparatus that were developed to facilitate it, was steadily unraveling the fabric of an older, more traditional way of being that was fundamentally *relational*, including in practices of economic exchange.



The same point was later further elaborated by the Hungarian political economist Karl Polanyi. In his 1944 watershed work titled *The Great Transformation: The*



Political and Economic Origins of Our Times, Polanyi traced how Market Society has relentlessly displaced the basic social order that characterized *all* previous human history. Modernity, he contended, is defined by the struggle between the forces of the autonomous market and what he called the “counter movement of social protectionism.” For a concrete contemporary analogy, think of the radical difference today between two sites of economic exchange: a local farmer’s market on one hand, and an online shopping network on the other. In the former, social relations are still paramount; in the latter, they have been entirely erased.

Tönnies and Polanyi help us keep the complicated thing simple enough to grapple with. They remind us that the two divergent forces of Community and Capital have been making competing claims on our hearts, minds and embodied lives in society for a long time. It seems pretty clear that our task as people of faith in this historical moment is to give priority to the ongoing struggle to recover, nurture and advocate for *Gemeinschaft* in the midst of the ever more insatiable power of *Gesellschaft*.

Neither Tönnies nor Polanyi could have anticipated the ecological dimensions of this crisis, but their logic can be extended to include it. From this perspective, the first relationship to be sacrificed under capitalism was our relationship with the earth. This means that restoring that relationship must be our first priority. In trying to make sense of this formidable task I find the “old cosmology” orientation of Kentucky farmer Wendell Berry more helpful than the “new cosmology” musings of philosopher Thomas Berry.

Wendell speaks a lot about the “two economies,” a resonance we’ll soon see in the teaching of Jesus in Luke 12. Berry refers to the divine creation as the “Great Economy”--the all-encompassing, integrated and functioning biosphere that

“includes principles and patterns by which values or powers or necessities are parceled out and exchanged.”³ Human systems, on the other hand, are “little economies” that depend upon and operate within the Great Economy. The problem is, our industrial order, with its penchant for control and its lack of limits, “does not see itself as a little economy; it sees itself as the *only* economy. It makes itself thus exclusive by the simple expedient of valuing only what it can use—that is, only what it can regard as raw material to be transformed mechanically into something else... The industrial economy is based on invasion and pillage of the Great Economy.”

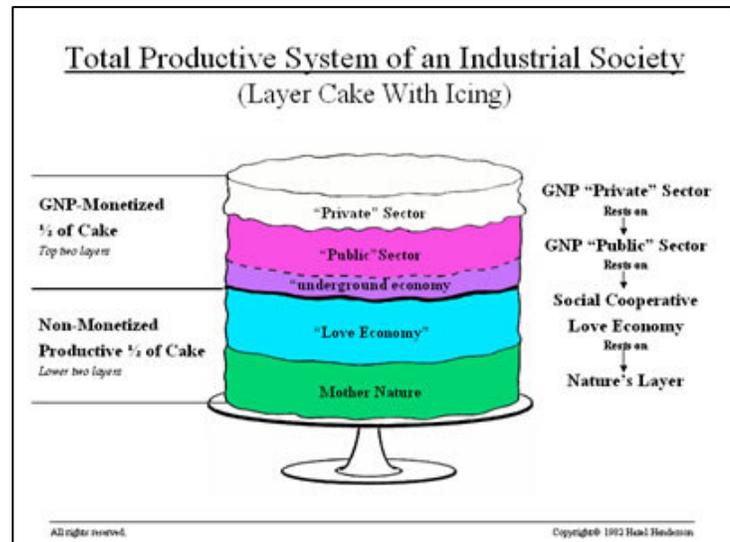


“By using up such goods as topsoil, fossil fuel, and fossil water—we incur a debt to the future that we cannot repay...what we call *use* the future will call ‘*theft*.’” This sort of surplus extraction “must accept impoverishment as the inescapable condition of abundance.” Moreover, he argues, “if our economic ideal is maximum profit with minimum responsibility, why should we be surprised to find our corporations so frequently in court, and robbery on the increase?”

In contrast, the Great Economy demands responsibility and stewardship based upon a consciousness of our profound interdependence with each other and the whole natural order. “The loser’s losses finally afflict the winner” in this system, says Berry (*left*), so “the ideal must be the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption, which both defines and requires neighborly love... If we do not serve what coheres and endures, we serve what disintegrates and destroys.”

Ecological economist Hazel Henderson best summarizes the points that Tonnies, Polanyi and Berry are making. Her well-known model of the “economic cake” argues that most economic calculations of “worth” (such as a nation’s GNP) gives monetary value only to private and public sector goods and services. They thus ignore what she calls “the care economy”—

Gemeinschaft—all of the non-monetized expressions of mutual aid, household and neighborhood cooperation upon which the formal economy is predicated (imagine trying to sustain a workforce without family and community). Henderson, in turn, also recognized that this “social cooperative” economy is predicated upon the Great Economy of



³ *Home Economics*, 1987, pp 56ff.

nature.

Orthodox economics, of course, imputes no intrinsic value to these two foundational layers of the cake—content to skim off the icing of private profit. Or, as another feminist economist put it recently in a comment about the government bailout of Wall Street, the profiteers are “jumping out of the cake, buck-naked.”⁴



Henderson (*left*) captures why our dominant economic story are fatally flawed: it ignores the two foundational layers of the cake. So to make our complicated crisis simple, we can reasonably assert that any possibility of future sustainability and justice must begin by revaluing the whole cake, *beginning from the bottom up*.

Now these broad ideas are not new to you, because you are the pioneer environmental economists and justice-minded ecologists who are already exploring their implications. What some of you might find surprising, however, is that the Bible is more of an ally than we imagined in our struggle to reverse the Great

Transformation about which Polanyi lamented. As we search for resources to hold community together in the face of everything pulling it apart, I want to suggest that we don't so much need a new cosmology as to recover an older, wiser one; and that scripture will be one of the most important resources for rebuilding a new story about economics.

II.

In my popular education work I emphasize the story of the manna in the wilderness as the foundational text of Sabbath Economics. It is *not* primarily a feeding miracle, nor a morality tale about trust (as is usually taught in our churches), but a didactic story about the importance of “following instructions” (16:4). The Hebrews have been sprung from Egyptian slavery, but must now face the harsh realities of life outside that imperial system. The ancient Israelites – like modern North Americans – couldn't imagine an economic system apart from the Egyptian political-military-technological complex, despite the fact that they were at the bottom of that pyramid. “Would that we had died at the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread,” they complain to Moses. “But you have led us into this desert to die of famine!” (Ex 16:3). As the old African American proverb put it, “It's easier to get the people out of Egypt than Egypt out of the people.”

The story then turns to illustrate Yahweh's alternative to the Egyptian economic cosmology. “I will rain bread from heaven” says the divine voice. This is an ancient trope symbolizing fertility as a Divine gift, a process that is praised in Isaiah 55:10:

⁴ Rickey Gard Diamond, <http://gaiaeros.com/2008/11/11/hazel-hendersons-cake-diagram-never-made-more-sense/>.

...the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater...

The fact that, as Joshua 5:12 later puts it, “the manna ceased on the date they ate the produce of the land” shows that manna is a metaphor for the earth’s natural productivity. The conditions for material sustenance are a gift from the Creator woven into the Creation. Exodus 16 proposes this as a “test” to see if Israel will follow instructions on how to “gather” this gift. The people’s first lesson outside of Egypt, in other words, is an *economic* one.

It should not come as a surprise that the divine alternative to empire is to reassert the cosmology of nature’s grace. After all, worldview sustained human lifeways for tens of thousands of years prior to the rise of imperial societies. It’s the oldest wisdom on the planet, still held by indigenous people and *campesinos* around the globe. And it is the worldview that Sr. Dorothy Stang (*right*) lived and died for in the Brazilian rain forests.



The “instructions” in Exodus 16 define for us the three characteristics of the economic practices of grace. First, every family is told to gather just enough manna for their needs (Ex 16:16-18). In contrast to Israel’s Egyptian condition of deprivation, here everyone has *enough*: “Those who gathered more had no surplus, and those who gathered less had no shortage.” In God’s economy there *is* such a thing as “too much” and “too little”—which of course contrasts radically with modern capitalism’s infinite tolerance for artificially engineered wealth and poverty.

This “theology of enough” is underlined by the (probably later) version of the manna story in Numbers 11, in which the people’s lack of limits is punished with a plague of “selfish excess”:

So the people worked all day and night and all the next day, gathering the quails; the least anyone gathered was ten homers... But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of God was kindled against the people, and God struck them with a very great plague. So that place was called *Kibroth-hattaavah*--which means, “the graves of craving” (Num 11:32-34; see Psalm 78:20-31; 106:13-15. *Right: Tintoretto, “The Miracle of the Manna,” 1577.*)



The second instruction is that the manna should

not be “stored up” (16:19-20). Wealth and power in Egypt was defined by surplus accumulation. It is no accident that Israel’s forced labor consisted of building “store-cities” (Ex 1:11), into which the empire’s plunder and the tribute of subject peoples was gathered. (This too prefigures capitalism, whose dictum, according to Marx, was: “Accumulate, accumulate, accumulate – this is the Law and the Prophets!”) The Bible understands how imperial societies exert centripetal force, drawing labor, resources and wealth into greater and greater concentrations of idolatrous power (an archetypal description of this is found in the story of the Tower of Babel, Gen 11:1-9). So Israel is enjoined to keep wealth *circulating* through strategies of redistribution, not *concentrating* through strategies of accumulation.

The third instruction introduces, for the first time in the biblical narrative, the communal discipline of keeping Sabbath (Ex 16:22-30). “Six days you shall gather; but on the seventh, which is a Sabbath, there will be none” (Ex 16:26). We Christians regard the Sabbath at best as one of the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:8-11), at worst as a quaint Jewish custom. But this injunction is instituted even *before* the Covenant at Sinai, and it is reiterated at the conclusion of the Covenant Code as a life and death issue (Ex 31:12-17). Sabbath is the “beginning and end of Torah.” Why? Because Sabbath is much more than a prescribed periodic rest for the land and for human labor. It is the bedrock of a culture of constraint. Its prohibitions function to disrupt our compulsive attempts to “control” nature, and our addictive need to “maximize” the forces of production and consumption.

“Sabbath observance requires a leap of faith, a firm confidence that the world will continue to operate benevolently for a day without human labor” writes Hebrew Bible scholar Richard Lowery.⁵ Sabbath is, in other words, fundamentally an ethos of self-limitation, something our modern culture is unable and unwilling to do. It isn’t hard to see how crucial such old wisdom is to our current struggle to change an economic story that is truly killing us and our world. (*Below: “Israelites gathering manna,” Ercole de’ Roberti, 1490.*)



⁵ Richard Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, Chalice Press, 2000.

The earth belongs to God and its fruits are a gift; therefore the people should justly distribute those fruits, and limit their production and consumption. These primal lessons were so crucial to the project of building a post-imperial world that the Israelites were instructed to keep a jarful of the manna *in front* of the Covenant (Ex 16:32; see Heb 9:4)—a constant reminder of the foundational two layers of the cake: the priority of the Great Economy” and the practice of what anthropologists call “generalized reciprocity.”

Of course, this vision is utterly contrary to economics as we know it in modernity. Our incredulity is rather humorously anticipated in the story itself: “manna” is a play on words and can be translated “What the hell *is this?*” (Ex 16:15). The Israelites, having been socialized into empire, didn’t recognize the cosmology of gift, and neither do we. Nevertheless, this old tale sets the pattern for a new economic ethos throughout the Hebrew scriptures, from Deuteronomic debt-release to the Levitical Jubilee, and from liturgical celebrations of shared abundance to prophetic rants against economic disparity in Israel.



It is *this* old cosmology of Sabbath Economics that Jesus of Nazareth sought to rehabilitate under the shadow of a different empire—and that is our task as well. The memory of the manna is *shown* in his wilderness feedings of the poor, and *told* as the central petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “Give us today enough bread.” The Sabbath Economics principle of the remainder—in which the edges of every field and the gleanings of every harvest *belong* by rights (not by charity) to the poor and the undomesticated animals—is embodied in Jesus’ authorization of his disciples to strip grain from a field.

But nowhere is the cosmology of grace and economic justice more clearly asserted in the gospel than in Jesus’ musings about the “lilies of the field” found in Luke 12:

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ 14 But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’ 15 And he said to them, ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’ 16 Then he told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17 And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” 18 Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” 20 But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” 21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’

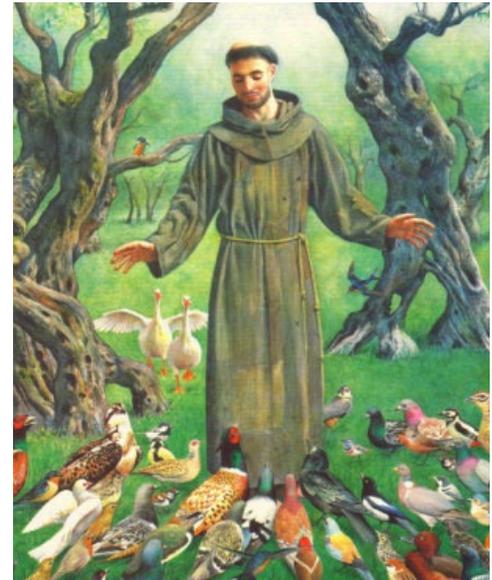
22 He said to his disciples, ‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. 23 For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. 24 Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! 25 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 26 If then you are not able to

do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? 27 Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 28 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! 29 And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. 30 For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31 Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

32 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

This text is, to our modern North American ears, simplistic, extreme and/or naïve. And in the wake of the recent global meltdown of financial markets, Jesus' counsel "Be not anxious" seems to us frankly absurd. If we Christians pay attention to this text at all, we sentimentalize it as a cute but irrelevant "St. Francis moment." Jesus may be talking to the birds and flowers, but he's surely not talking to *us*.

This teaching indeed cuts diametrically across our most sacred assumptions about our entitlement to re-engineer nature and secure economic security through market dominance. But what if Jesus means *exactly* what he says? To take him seriously means we must confront the three primary



pathologies of modern economic culture—*anxiety, addiction and alienation*—as life and death issues. This may be a "text of terror" for us, but if heeded, it also represents an invitation to liberation—and a key the task of revising our economic story.

This extended meditation in Luke 12 concerns the fundamental struggle between the dominant imperial economy and the divine economy of grace. The first section thus denounces the artificial abundance of the rich and the artificial scarcity of the poor, and launches a diatribe against the lethal, predatory force of "greed" (Lk 12:15). The second section offers two contrasting positive object lessons. Each section concludes with parallel proverbs about "treasure":

I. Negative Object Lessons:

- Dispute about Inheritance (vv 13-14)
- Warning against *pleonexia* (v 15)
- Parable of the Rich Farmer (vv 16-20)
- Conclusion: “So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God” (v 21)

II. Positive Object Lessons:

- Command not to worry about material sustenance (vv 22-23)
- First example
 - Pay attention to the Raven; assurance of God’s care (v 24)
 - Exhortation not to worry (v 25)
- Second example
 - Pay attention to the lilies; assurance of God’s care (vv 27-28)
 - Exhortation not to worry; seek the Great Economy (v 29-31)
- Final exhortation not to fear: redistribute wealth to the poor
- Conclusion: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (v 34)

The sequence begins with a dispute over inheritance ((*klēronomia*, literally a “distribution of properties,” 12:13f). Israelite custom stipulated that an estate could be divided on the demand of a single son (see Dt 21:17). The scenario alluded to here might be that a younger brother wants to “divide” his share from the older brother (as in the case of the parable of the Prodigal Son, Lk 15:11ff). Jesus’ reputation as champion of the underdog may have motivated the man’s approach for help with a “just settlement.” Rabbis often played the role of legal arbiter, which is why Jesus is addressed here as “teacher.” However in antiquity, as today, inheritance laws functioned to pass on material wealth (and thus class privilege) from generation to generation—which is why Jesus refuses to engage this dispute, and instead uses it as an opportunity to address the deeper issues.

Instead, he issues two strong verbs of caution--“Watch out for” and “Guard yourselves against every form of greed” (12:15, Gk *pasēs pleonexias*). Jesus perceived greed *not* as a moral category, but a lethal, predatory force. *Pleonexia* (insatiability, avarice) comes from the Greek stem *plē*, which is used in words such as “multitude, filled, flood, and fulfilled.” It is related to the Gk verbs *pleonazō* (in the intransitive, “to have too much” or “grow too big,” see 2 Cor 8:15) and *pleonekteō* (“to take advantage of or defraud,” see 2 Cor 2:11, 7:2; 12:17f; I Thes 4:6). It is the sin of “taking too much” in the parlance of Exodus 16. Greed was universally condemned throughout antiquity as one of the three greatest sins (see Mk 7:22; Rom 1:29; I Cor 5:10f; Eph 4:19), and *pleonexia* is tantamount to idolatry in Col 3:5 & Eph 5:5. So this is a grave warning by Jesus.



The proverb Jesus quotes next (15b) reads literally: “Not even when it abounds to him/her is a person’s life made up of that which he/she possesses.” (Left: “Mammon,” George Frederick Watts, 1884-85.) In a more contemporary idiom: We are NOT what we own. The Greek noun in focus here (and in v. 33, **huparchonton**) is a participle used as a substantive, from **huparchō**, “to be”; a semantic analogy in English is: “be-longings.” Used mostly in the N.T. by Luke, this word refers to:

- material goods used by women in 8:3 to sustain the discipleship community;
- that which disciples ultimately must “renounce” (14:33);
- that which the “strong man” seeks to protect (11:21); and
- that which the large estate holder entrusts to his stewards (12:44; 16:1);

Most importantly for the narrative logic of Luke, Zacchaeus distributes half of his **huparchonton** to the poor at the culmination of the story (19:8), and it is what is redistributed by the Pentecostal Acts

community (Acts 4:32). Rather than being possessed by our possessions, stuff exists to be shared—to build community.

To illustrate this point, Jesus offers a story about a rich farmer (12:16-21). It was probably a well-known folk tale, since similar versions appear in the earlier *Wisdom of Sirach* (2nd century BCE) and *Gospel of Thomas*.

One man grows rich by carefulness and greed, and this will be his reward: When he says, “Now I can rest and enjoy my goods,” he doesn’t know when the time will come when he will die and leave them to others (Sir 11:18f).

Jesus said: There was a rich man who had many possessions. He said: “I will use my possessions to sow and reap and plant, to fill my barns with fruit, that I may have need of nothing.” Those were his thoughts in his heart; and that night he died. He who has ears, let him hear. (Thom 63).

This is the first of three sobering Lukan parables about “rich men.” The other two are found in Luke 16, where they bookend Jesus’ teaching on Mammon:

- A) 16:1-8 “There was a rich man who...” The “Shrewd” Steward
- B) 16:9-13 Jesus’ teaching on God and Mammon
- B’) 16:14-18 Attack on “lovers of money”
- A’) 16:19-31 “There was a rich man who...” Lazarus and Dives

Luke’s concern in these unflattering portraits is not just to critique “Affluenza,” but to assert an alternative to ruling class cosmology.

Jesus begins spinning his alternative worldview already in the parable: “The land of a rich man brought forth great fruit.” The land is the central, if ignored, character in this story, implying that the abundance resulted from the *earth’s* work, not the farmer’s (see Mk 4:26-28). The verb is **euphoreō** (whence our “euphoria”); in antiquity, this wasn’t a psychological mood, but a state of material well-being. Central to this parable is the wealthy landowner’s “internal dialogue,” which is a parody of wrong thinking, despite the fact that it sounds *exactly* like most financial counseling today! His singular concern with the gift of agricultural surplus is how to store and consume it privately—note the proliferation of the first person singular:

- i) What shall I do?
I have nowhere to store my crops
- ii) I shall do this:
I will pull down my barns and
build larger ones;
and there I will store all my
grain and my goods;
- iii) And I will say to my soul, “Soul,
you have many goods laid up for
many years;
take it easy, eat, drink and enjoy
yourself!”



The last verb (**euphrainou**, to make merry in a feast) is used in another Lukan rich man parable to describe the decadent Dives, who “feasted every day” while Lazarus starved at his gate (16:19; above: “*The Parable of the rich man*,” Rembrandt, 1627).

Moreover, below the surface of this story is the issue of *how* this farmer acquired his prosperity. He sees it as an entitlement, but it was widely understood in antiquity that inordinate wealth was built on the backs of others. Large estates usually resulted from the expropriation of smallholders land through debt default—now *there’s* an old story! In Jesus’ view, then, the farmer’s bumper crop *should* have occasioned redistribution to those in need—as reparation! Instead, however, this farmer purposes to lay his surplus up “for many years” (v. 19), suggesting that he may be stockpiling grain against future lean times, when prices would be driven up and profits greater. While this may seem like a no-brainer to our market logic, the rich man’s “bigger barns” strategy is clearly suspect in light of the “instructions” of Exodus 16 not to accumulate the gift, but to keep in circulating.

This parable is, in other words, a classic illustration of **pleonexia**. The punch line is sharp and unequivocal: God calls the farmer a “fool” (12:20f). The parable is a *midrash* on two Hebrew Bible texts. The Psalmist speaks of the “practical atheism” of those who live in contempt of the Divine economy and of the poor:



Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'
They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds;
there is no one who does good...

Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers
who eat up my people as they eat bread...? (Psalm 14:1,4)

And the prophet Jeremiah declares: "Like the partridge hatching what it did not lay, so are all who amass wealth unjustly; in mid-life it will leave them, and at their end they will prove to be fools" (Jer 17:11).

The parable ends ironically with the very question with which this sequence began, the dispute over inheritance: "These things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Lk 12:20) Jesus' conclusion then makes explicit the contrast between the 'two economies': "So it is with those who 'treasure up' for themselves, and consequently are not 'rich' in the sight of God" (12:21). The logic here is that the "Great Economy" of nature (as Wendell Berry calls it) precedes us and will survive us. Private accumulation is thus a desperate, but ultimately short-term, hedge against the inevitable economic redistribution that comes with mortality. Conversely, the divine Commonwealth is the *only* thing that endures, and thus the only "treasure" of actual value. The negative object lesson of the rich farmer suggests that the ownership paradigm must be shifted from "mine" to "ours."

III.

The first part of Luke's meditation on greed is a call to economic justice; the second part now turns to the deeper underpinning of such a call: the cosmology of grace. "*For this reason* I tell you not to be anxious!" (12:22f). This is a prohibition, not a suggestion, and warnings against anxiety are a refrain in the teaching that now follows (vv. 22, 25, 26).

The contrast between Jesus' counsel and the rich farmer's self-referential strategy is striking:

Rich man: I will say to my soul (**psuchē**)... take it easy, eat, drink and enjoy yourself! (12:19)

Jesus: Do not be anxious for your life (**psuchē**), what you will eat, or about your body... (12:22)

Jesus then offers a counter-imperative: Consider the birds and flowers. In a parallel doublet, each example is followed by an assurance about how God cares for us and a reiteration not to be anxious:

A) Turn your attention to the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn,

B) and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!

C) And can any of you by being anxious add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?

A) Turn your attention to the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

B) But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith!

C) And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep being anxious.
(12:24-29)

The Greek ***katanoēsate*** is an aorist imperative, commanding action here and now. I have translated it literally: “Turn your attention instead to this.” But paying careful attention to birds and flowers is exactly what we modern folk have *no intention* of doing; indeed, this is where we check out. Isn’t that quaint, we think, Jesus is a botanist and a birdwatcher. All very sweet, but it’s got nothing to do with real economics! Unfortunately for us, to dismiss Jesus here is to miss the *key* to his alternative cosmology.

Jesus is likely pointing out these positive object lessons as he walks through a field with his disciples. The truth is close at hand, if we pause long enough from our civilizational preoccupations to encounter what Aquinas famously called “the book of nature.” Or as Luther put it: “God writes the gospel not in the Bible alone, but on trees and flowers and clouds and stars.” This is *not* utopian ranting. “Utopia” was Thomas More’s contemptuous word for the world that does not, indeed that cannot exist.⁶ Jesus, on the other hand, is talking about a very real world that exists right in front of us: the sensuous, embodied, alive, mystical world of the biosphere. But he understands that we do not have eyes to see it, because we are utterly distracted by the works of our own hands and by our built environments, and because we have objectified and commodified nature beyond recognition.

Jesus’ first example is the raven, which means to allude to two Hebrew Bible texts that praise God’s gracious provision to all living things, particularly in times of hunger:

- Job 38:41: “Who provides for the raven its prey when its young ones cry to God and wander about for lack of food?”
- Ps 147:9: “God gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry.”

⁶ From More’s book by that name, published ironically in 1516, not even 25 years after Europeans’ first encounter with the “New World,” where the old cosmology still reigned!

The prophet Elijah, moreover, is fed by a raven, a story that takes place during a famine, and which is followed by a feeding miracle (I Kg 17:1-16). Birds know nothing about the rich man's "storage rooms" nor "barns" (as in 12:18), "but God feeds them."

We are then cautioned against imagining we can add a single "cubit" (= 18 inches) to our stature (Gk *prosthēnai*, from whence our word prosthetics). This metaphor probably pertains to life-span, as in Psalm 39:5 (which is, not surprisingly, a reminder that we can't take our material possessions with us into death):

LORD, let me know my end,
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.
You have made my days a few
handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing in your
sight.
...Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;
they heap up, and do not know who
will gather.

While the ancients understood that we cannot engineer or alter our lives in significant ways, we moderns still labor under the fantasy that we can, and thus eschew any notion of limits.

Jesus' second example is the wild lilies that bloomed around the Jordan valley in early spring. Significantly, images of lilies adorned Solomon's temple (I Kg 7:19,22,26)—with which the flower is here contrasted. (Right: illuminated manuscript, François Maître, ca. 1475-80.)

Lilies do not engage in hard labor such as spinning cloth. "But I tell you," says Jesus with rhetorical insistence, "Solomon in all his glory was never 'wrapped around' like one of these." This refers to the sumptuous royal garb of Israel's greatest king, and is probably a euphemism for the great Solomonic temple, the zenith of Israel's civilizational aspirations. This is no mere hyperbole; **rather, Jesus is asserting that the greatest technological and/or social achievement known to his Judean contemporaries has less intrinsic value than one wildflower in the Divine economy.** Yikes, what if he *means* it?

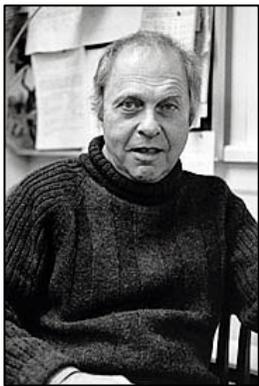
This is the absolute *opposite* of our capitalist cosmology, which legitimizes the routine sacrifice of species to the idols of technological hegemony and economic growth. It authorizes a continuing holocaust of extinction and endangerment. Just in the last few years, the Baiji Dolphin, gone; the West African Black Rhino, gone; the Golden Toad and the Pyrenean Ibex and the Spix's Macaw, all gone. The World Conservation Union most recent 2003 *Red List of Threatened Species*, included a quarter of all mammals studied across the globe, almost half of all fish, some 60 %



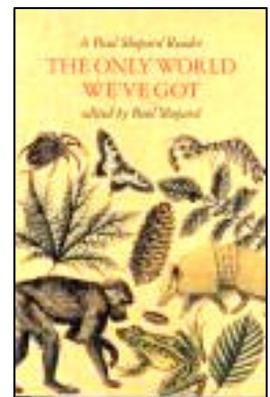
of all flowering plants, almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of all insects, and over 90 percent of all mosses.⁷

Consider the spotted owl or the St Helena Olive, says Jesus. Blather, our severe modern economic orthodoxies respond dismissively. But it is not blather. Jesus is invoking the cosmology of Exodus 16, which is the cosmology of indigenous and traditional peoples the world over and throughout history. This way of seeing translated into economic lifeways characterized by symbiosis with nature, sustainable and local production and consumption, and cooperative and equitable work patterns, as has been shown by anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins and Paul Shepard (*below*). The Bible is doing nothing more and nothing less than re-centering us in the oldest wisdom on the planet.

Of course, if Jesus is right, our entire modern economic cosmology falls down like a house of cards. The history of “Progress” has been founded on the ideas that nature is an object to exploit for our industrial purposes, and that value is only what *we* impute through our relentless attempts to re-engineer the biosphere for profit. Yet our project has placed both ecological and social systems on the brink of collapse. So who is the “fool” here? Do we trust in an economic cosmology that sustained human life for 100,000 years or more, or one that may not last another 100?



Jesus’ exhortation not to “seek food and drink” (12:29f) is a repudiation of the rich man’s decadent feasting in the shadow of his barns of greed (12:19). “All the nations of the world hustle after such things” (*epizētousin* is an intensification of the previous verb *zēteite*). Roman imperial culture indeed was awash in anxiety, alienation and addiction, and so is ours. We are taught to compete incessantly in order to accrue private wealth in order to satisfy our engineered appetites. The Divine Caretaker, on the other hand, just wants to gift us with sustenance.

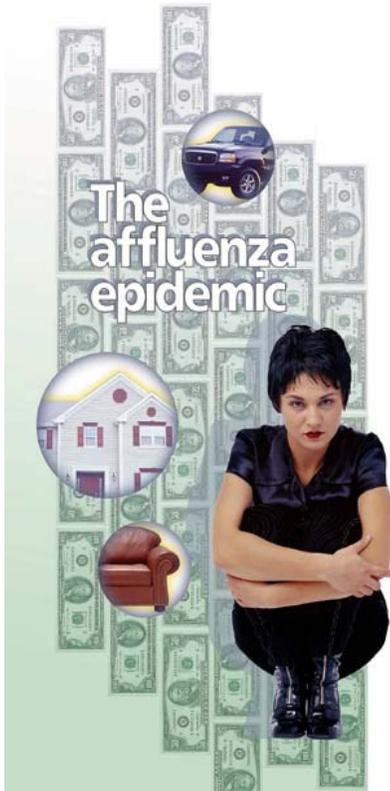


It is important that Jesus does not dismiss human material life by invoking some heroic or ascetic imperative. He emphasizes that God, as a nurturing heavenly parent, is mindful of our legitimate needs. The vision here, as in Exodus 16, is of an economy of enough. “Instead, seek the Kingdom” (12: 31)—which is to say, the Divine economy of grace. In the Great Economy “everything will be added to us”—that is, our life necessities—whereas we cannot “add” a single day to our lives through anxious managerial engineering or accumulation. The rich man secured *his* food and drink by playing the market to his advantage, but could never be sure he had enough. Disciples are to resist anxiety by trusting in the divine provision of enough for *everyone*, which it is our divine Parent’s “pleasure” to gift us; we need not live in perpetual fear (12:32).

⁷ www.libraryindex.com/pages/633/Extinction-Endangered-Species-HOW-MANY-SPECIES-ARE-ENDANGERED.html. See also www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Endangered_species.

This is why we can feel free to re-communitize wealth with a special concern for the poorest—which is what Jesus abruptly commands us to do (12:33). His rationale is simple: thieves can't steal what isn't held privately, and moths can't eat what isn't stored up.⁸ It comes as no surprise that Jesus will shortly make the same demand in Luke's call of the rich young ruler:

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, 'How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' (Luke 18:22-24)



Anticipating this discipleship rejection story, the section we have been focusing on in Luke 12 concludes with a reiteration of the moral to the parable about the rich man's barns (12:21): "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (12:34). The second part of Jesus' teaching in Luke 12 thus closes by reiterating the theme of the first part: economic justice for all. The cosmology of the non-anxious, interdependent web of life is, by definition, *relational*. This means that the purpose of an economy is to serve social relations, beginning with the poor. Community is restored to the center of the economic story.

Perhaps more than any other text in the N.T., Luke 12:13-34 links ecology, economics and faith, articulating the cosmological foundation for "Sabbath Economics." Jesus challenges us to live as if there is a Great Economy undergirded by divine compassion. *This* is what holds us together despite everything that would pull us apart.

We now rightly turn to complicate this simple premise: to detailed analyses of our present economic and ecological crisis, to policy and advocacy issues, and to practical strategies of resistance and renewal. I certainly have my own priorities, which include the following foci: bioregional economics; habitat restoration; ethnobotany; community investing; and popular education in biblical and economic literacy. As we get down to cases, I

⁸ Interestingly, Jesus' brother James employs this very image in his rant against murderous Affluenza:

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts on a day of slaughter. (Jas 5:1-5)

commend a couple of rules of thumb we use in our Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries Sabbath Economics Household Covenant work:

- We are all subjects in this work, and everyone has a part to play, no matter what our skill set or context;
- This work is profoundly personal and profoundly political; thus no step we propose is too small, and no step too big;
- Our predicament historically demands the kind of radical honesty regarding our collective addictions that befits the spirit of a twelve step meeting, *not* mere moral posturing or political polemics about what others should do.

Let us keep in mind Wendell Berry's dictum: "The great obstacle is simply this: the conviction that we cannot change because we are dependent upon what is wrong. But that is the addict's excuse, and we know that it will not do."

But as we immerse ourselves in complex conversations concerning how to more strategically build a movement to, as Greider put it, "dismantle or reengineer the status quo," may we not lose sight of the simple enormity of our vocation. Our current crisis is due to the ecological politics of scarcity and the economics of disparity; it is *our* civilization that is pursuing a dangerous fantasy, not Jesus. As people of faith, let us not be embarrassed to invoke and rely on old wisdom, which invites all of us "who have ears to hear" to listen to the birds and the flowers, in order to relearn the cosmology and practices of Sabbath Economics. *Below: "Cedars of Lebanon," Edward Lear, 1862).*



Ched Myers works with Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries in Oak View, CA (www.bcm-net.org).