

Sabbath Reflections 5

Capitalism and Inequity versus a Gospel Mandate

Sabbath Economics: The Theology of Enough¹

1. John Vincent Taylor, *Enough is Enough* (London: SCM 1975).

2. Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*, (Massachusetts: Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries 2007).

3. Walter Brueggemann, The liturgy of abundance and the myth of scarcity in *The Christian Century*, 24-31 March 1999.

<http://www.reigion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=533>

4. Mirrored in the New Testament ideal: The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little (2 Corinthians 8:15).

5. Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Massachusetts: Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries) 38-45.

The term 'Sabbath Economics,' which has received popular currency through the excellent work of Ched Myers and Bartimaeus Cooperative ministries,² refers to abundance and how it is sustained; as well as scarcity and how it is avoided.

Walter Brueggemann³ argues that the creation story, which climaxes in the Sabbath, not only outlines how people of every time and every generation are to experience the abundance of the created order. In addition, he points to the paradox of abundance from a human perspective: security in abundance depends upon the wisdom of knowing that we are dependent upon God; and for our wellbeing, we rely on the health of the created order. The Creation story, he says, is not simply an account of God's relationship with creation. Rather, it is also an account of the relationship which exists between each constituent part within creation. The whole of creation is not only finite. Each part, including humanity, is limited by the fidelity it owes to the whole. It seems strange to talk of abundance and limitation in the same breath; however, fidelity means that we must never knowingly diminish anyone or thing with whom we have a relationship of trust or stewardship. Quite the opposite, our actions must seek the good of the other. We are limited by the requirement of goodness.

This is Brueggemann's argument. Limitation protects abundance. By contrast, he argues that our economy, which is often described through the metaphor '24/7,' is actually an economy of scarcity. More is exploited and stored than is needed, because we are inculcated with the fear of scarcity. Trust in abundance, confidence in the multiplying effect of goodness, he argues, obviates the need for such destructive behavior.

One of the five formative narratives of the Israelite people is the journey through the wilderness and their experience of God's providence with manna (Exodus 16). The manna was to be collected on six days, but not on the seventh. On the sixth day, enough would be collected for the seventh: 'those who gathered much had nothing over and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each needed' (Exodus 16:18).⁴ When an attempt was made to collect more than was necessary, it became foul and was lost.

We are all reasonably familiar with the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). The traditional interpretation of the parable is that the talents are to be understood as personal gifts or skills. The first two servants are lauded through the productive use of their skills. The problem with this interpretation is that the master is described as harsh 'reaping where he had not sown.' However there is another, perhaps more subversive, interpretation.⁵ A talent in Roman times was a very considerable amount of money, roughly equivalent to 6000 denarii, or 6000 times a day's wage for a laborer. In those days, as in every epoch of history, wealthy landowners, or bankers or traders, loan substantial amounts of money on terms that are almost impossible to repay. When they are not repaid, then the land is foreclosed; the wealthy acquire more property, and those who have lost become no better than slave labourers. (Subprime mortgages have proved to be a modern day equivalent.) In this interpretation of the parable, it is the third servant who is the hero for he refuses to accept the principles of an economy of exploitation that leads to scarcity.

Sabbath economics is, therefore, a commitment to an economic mindset through which abundance is shared by all and scarcity ceases to be the dominant experience of most. How can this be achieved? Here are some suggestions:

By living more simply -- We have all heard this catch cry so many times that it has probably lost its force. Because currency economies (in contrast with barter economies) flourish through more and more exchange, there is a constant encouragement through government policy, and company advertising for everyone to consume more. All, with the exception of the very poor, accumulate and consume more than is needed. This is very strange behaviour given well documented evidence that unnecessary accumulation diminishes, rather than advances human happiness!⁶ We should not throw away a third of the food we buy, nor should we live in houses that are several times larger than we require, nor should we acquire goods that are stored and seldom used.

By eliminating debt -- Some know the freedom felt when the last mortgage payment has been met. Many of us live in economies where debt is encouraged because receiving interest on a loan is one of the gateways to greater wealth for the already advantaged. Scriptures are alive with many injunctions that encourage the removal of debt by 'sundown.' While such a situation is not literally possible, at least not in all circumstances, there are many options that are possible:

- Where possible, we can avoid the accruing of personal debt;
- We can make the elimination of debt a high priority;
- We can consider ways of assisting the reduction of indebtedness in others;
- We can audit our contribution to environmental debt and do all in our power to reduce and, if possible, eliminate it.

By investing surplus differently -- Even those of us with modest incomes almost always have some invested resources. Usually these resources are invested in the bank, or market, with the intention of gaining maximum return with minimal risk. In most cases, these investments are assisting the accumulation of wealth to already wealthy companies or banks. It does not require a lot of effort to research ways of investing directly in community building -- in the health and wellbeing of fellow and international citizens. The iconic example of this investment is the Nobel Prize winning Muhammad Yunus,⁷ who has assisted thousands of Bangladeshi women out of poverty and into independent living.

By strategic giving -- The biblical standard of giving within 'Sabbath Economics' is 10% or a tithe. There are many for whom this has become a minimum way of life. However, for many it is not. In Australia the average giving of the very rich is well short of this standard: while being more than 40% of the very wealthy, those on an income of \$1M+ per annum give absolutely nothing at all.⁸

Ever since humankind ceased being hunter gatherers and became village and urban dwellers, we have needed an economic system to undergird the myriad of exchanges that make up the business of daily life. At one end of the modern economic spectrum is a market system that is increasingly unregulated and which is geared towards the maximizing of profit. The other end of the spectrum should not be a communist cooperative, but biblically mandated economics. Sabbath Economics is a celebration of enough, abundance protected by limits, an abundance through which 'those who gather most do not have too much, and those who gather little have enough.'

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. How do you interpret the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30)? Does the upside-down interpretation above surprise, shock, or disturb you?
2. How might the biblical practice of tithing affect the land, water, and oceans?
3. In which life situations do you and your community find yourself asking 'what is enough?'

6. Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth. Economics for a Finite Planet* (London: Earthscan 2009) 146 -148.

7. Muhammad Yunus won the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for his micro investment amongst the very poor who were able, through this investment to commence their own cottage industries. The investment grew into the Grameen Bank (The Bank of the Villages).

8. Article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* 1 April 2012 <http://www.smh.com.au/national/well-be-richer-when-our-last-cheque-bounces>