

On Account of the Economy
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Note: The sermon is an oral event. This manuscript may not reflect the exact spoken words. If you want to hear what was actually said, you can purchase a CD of the sermon in the church office. © Matthew Johnson-Doyle, 2011.

“I got a job working construction for the Johnstown Company
But lately there ain't been much work on account of the economy
Now all them things that seemed so important
Well mister they vanished right into the air”

Those are lines from the Bruce Springsteen song, The River,
which was released in 1980.

To me, that line: lately there ain't been much work on account of the economy
captures, perfectly, the sense of powerlessness
that comes with a recession, a depression;
it is not on account of having performed badly,
or because he did something wrong,
or anything, really, in his control;
no, there ain't much work
on account of the economy –
this large, impersonal, mysterious force,
which goes up and down,
which wields its invisible hand.

He doesn't understand it,
but there ain't much work,
and that is a hard cold fact.

It was then, it is now.

That's a hard cold fact.

Here's the thing.

Some of you would like a sermon today about the origin of the term economy,
and about how the theology of Calvinism gave root to our current economy system,
and what a Unitarian Universalist theology of economy might suggest
as an alternative to the dominant theological-economic paradigm.
You're going to get some of that.

Others of you would really love a sermon, as they say,
ripped from today's headlines.
I could talk about Occupy Wall Street, the bank bailouts,
and mortgage's and the jobs bill and all that.
I could rail against the current system,
which allocates political power on the basis of wealth,

thus making the rich richer and the poor poorer,
and I could summon our inner Robin Hoods,
call us to the streets, the ballot box, the pen and paper or keystroke and wifi connection,
call us to action.
Nothing wrong with that sermon.

I also know this:

I also know that what a lot of you need today isn't a theological explication,
and it isn't a call to action,
what a lot of you need – whether you can speak it aloud or not –
what a lot of you need is what we in this trade call “a pastoral sermon” –
in other words, you need me to love you,
to tell you the truth:
I know it hurts, and bad.
and I love you, and we love you, and you are good and worthy,
even though you can't find a good job, or any job,
or your lover can't,
or your son or daughter can't,
even though you are underwater on your home and terrified,
even though your credit card balance keeps going in the wrong direction,
even though you've gotten a past due notice or two or three,
even all that and worse, I love you, we love you.
I know it hurts.
I know it is scary.

And I want you to know this first:

I love you, we love you, and you are good and worthy.

I'm going to get into the theory in the minute,
and I'm going to come back to this point,
but I want you to know right now, right here:
God, the spirit, life itself, whatever you call it:
loves you.

You are important and lovable,
whether you feel like it or not.
Doesn't matter if you are working or not,
happy or not, wealthy or not, self-confident or not,
doesn't matter:
you are sacred. you are loved.
Maybe that doesn't make it easier.
A good job for you, for the one you love,
a rebounding housing market,
a vacation,
that would make it easier – I know.
But know you are loved.
You are worthy.

A friend and colleague of mine – the Rev. Justin Schroeder,

at First Universalist, Minneapolis –
I was listening to a podcast of a recent sermon of his on this same topic,
and Justin used a metaphor that I think is useful:
he talked about two maps.
A map overlays reality – it describes it,
tell us how to move forward, what things are called.
But the map is not the territory,
and the map isn't real.
You can choose what map to use.

In our modern consumerist, capitalist world, we are given a map.
Justin says the directions on this map, the consumerist map,
are things like fear, greed, guilt, ego-gratification, and exclusion.
This map overlays reality and it says,
if you don't have a good job, if you are not materially successful,
or if you don't buy the right stuff,
well, then you should feel guilty and afraid,
then you don't really count.
That's what the map says, but that's not the territory, that's just the map.

Justin says the other map, the spirit map,
is filled with directions like love, hospitality, service, and so on.
It is a different way of reading the same reality,
a way of placing value and giving meaning to our best selves,
instead of our worst.

So when I say you are loved, and you are worthy,
I'm saying, tear up that map of fear and guilt.
Tear it up.
The theology with which that map is inked,
that's not our theology.
That map isn't real, no matter what anyone says.
I got a better map.

Lately, there ain't been much work on account of the economy.

The Economy isn't a real thing, of course –
it is an explanation. It's a map.
When we talk about the economy,
it is a way of saying,
oh, here is the reason that their ain't much work,
or that you can't sell your house,
or that interest rates just shot up or down
or whatever –
it's on account of the economy.

Why was the Irish teenage girl sewing in a factory so poor?

Because of the economy.

Why was the son of the mayor so rich?

Because of the economy.

Of course.

It used to be that the explanation for these facts wasn't about economics, which is a word that wasn't applied beyond your own household economy until a few hundred years ago, no, it wasn't economics, it was theology: that God had ordained it to be so.

This is Calvinistic Capitalism.

If you are a Calvinist,
you begin with idea that everyone is sinful.
Soaked in sin from birth.
Wrong, depraved, evil.
Really bad.
Because of Eve, you see.
Because she wanted to enjoy the fruit –
because it was beautiful and tasty and she bite into it with relish.
Naughty girl, they thought.

So, here you get the first part of the Calvinist doctrine of life:
don't enjoy things.
The mortification of the flesh, it is called in our reading.
Don't enjoy things.
Don't have art in your white-walled chapels,
don't lust for life –
that's what Eve did, that's the path of sin.

Now, according the Calvinists,
there is an escape hatch –
not for everyone, but for some:
Jesus. Jesus is the escape hatch.
Jesus sacrifices himself to atone for Eve's sin,
and so some of us are redeemed.
But that happened a long time ago,
so God and Jesus must have already known
who would be saved and who wouldn't
which means – you follow me –
that you are either predestined for hell or for heaven.
You can't do anything to change that. It's done.

Some are blessed and some are cursed.

Now, how do you know you are blessed?

Ah, here's the clincher.
You know you are blessed when you are materially successful.
It is a sign of your blessing, your election by grace, on this earth.

Of course, everyone wants their neighbors to think that they are blessed,
so work hard, make money, and everyone will think you are among the elect.

Thus, the infamous Protestant Work Ethic.

Under the original Calvinist system,
two factors mitigated the destructive character of this ethic, at least a little:
first, the importance of humility.
You were supposed to work hard and be rich,
but you didn't flaunt it.
second, the importance of charity.
To be charitable with your wealth was also a clear sign of election,
so the best possible state of affairs
was to be rich, quiet, and generous.
You lived modestly, but everyone knew it was you who
paid for the new museum.

This was their map of the world,
and it explained a lot:
it explained why some folks were rich,
and some were poor.
It explained why and how to be rich,
and how not to be rich.
It was a powerful map.

Troestch argues that this system became unmoored,
that folks lost the mitigating factors of humility and charity,
a secular capitalism overtook this religious capitalism,
and turned it ugly, cruel, and sad.
Work became for work's sake.

We wrapped up this idea,
that the wealthy are blessed by God,
with a radical insidious individualism:
everyone on their own,
do what you can for yourself,
a man's house is his castle,
and so on.

Think of it this way: the Calvinist Capitalist map,
with humility and charity crossed out,
and pride and greed written in their place.
It's an ugly map.

This map dominates our consciousness.
It shapes our lives.

I don't know about you, but I really want to be done with it.
I want to tear it up, stomp on it, set it aflame.
I hate this map.

I can't stand what it does to our society –
the way that it allows folks to say,
oh, well, the poor deserve their fate.
Too bad for them.

People look at the very poor – when they have the courage to look at all,
most folks just turn away,
but when they do look, they say,
there but for the grace of god go I –
and what a mean and petty god that is;
why do you get that grace and they don't?

What did you do to deserve what you have,
and what did they do to deserve to be punished so?

I hate this map.
I hate what it does to my soul.
I know this map is wrong, I know it.
But sometimes I forget, and I want.
I want that fancy thing, which I'm sure would make me happy.
More paperclips than I could possibly use before I die.
I work to stay on a budget – and this resentment grows in me:
why should I have to stay on a budget?
why am I not blessed enough to have more money?
I don't need to be a billionaire or anything,
but you know what I mean.
Just a little more, always just a little more.

Fear, greed, guilt, ego-gratification, exclusion.

I hate this map.

And I know it isn't real. It isn't the territory.

I forget sometimes, but then I am reminded.
You know what reminds me,
what reveals the territory behind the map?

Worship. Singing.
This last week I went to a minister's study group,

we hear papers, have rich intellectual discussion.

We also worship.

We sing, we pray, someone preaches a word of comfort, challenge, hope to our lives.

We talk a hike in the woods,

hear the leaves rustle under our feet.

Sit and talk with friends, tell jokes, look at pictures of each other's kids,

laugh, cry.

We remember and honor the dead,

and welcome a new member or two each year to the group.

If I wasn't a minister, I would still come to church every week.

I need it, to remind me what's real,

to help me lay aside my fears, my resentments, my greed.

I would need to hear an alternative version of the theological-economic paradigm,

a different map, our liberally religious map.

Let me tell you about it:

First of all, there's no original sin on this map.

If a woman long ago bit into fruit, and did so with relish, lusciously,
good for her.

Enjoy your food, it is a gift.

Enjoy the world, it is a gift.

This is where we begin:

instead of thinking you deserve, or don't deserve, wealth,

give thanks –

give thanks for this day you are given,

for the sun and the moon and the wind and the earth,

give thanks and remember,

you did nothing to earn this gift.

You were born, and this is the world given unto you:

be grateful for it. It is the valley of love and delight.

It is a gift, and not one to be put upon a shelf,

but one to be lived, to be inhabited with joyfulness.

This is our theological system.

From this gratitude, we are moved to love, and to kinship.

It is the teaching of our faith that all people are brothers and sisters,

and that all people – every one of them – are sacred, worthy,

worthy of respect, justice, and care.

I can't prove that this is true. I assert it based on faith,

and based on the knowledge that it feels right in the bones.

I know it because I know that the women and men I admire,

whose lives make beauty and speak power,

they believe it and live that way.

From gratitude we are moved to generosity,
not the restrained charity of Calvinism,
but the joyful sharing of the quilt-maker and the king,
the giving from the heart of ourselves.

Thus, we do not think that some are predestined for hell.
Our Universalist ancestors said, and we can still affirm:
God is love, and everyone is predestined for heaven,
for reconciliation and reunion with the spirit of love and life.
Everyone.

So **if** life is a gift, and you don't have to worry about God blessing or cursing you
or anyone else, the question becomes not,
"how hard will you work to prove you have been given grace?"
instead, the question is,
"what will you do with the grace you have already been given?"

What will you do with it?

When I stand in this question, when I live in this question,
I do want to work hard at my job,
not because of my fear but because of my joy.

When I stand in this question,
I'm fine with less – not because I have to be, though I do,
but because I remember that too many paperclips,
too much stuff, gets in the way, distracts from the real.

When I stand in this question,
I am moved to work for justice,
to challenge the system as it is,
the system –
the concentration of political power in the wealthy elite,
the writing off of poor neighborhoods and poor children,
the tearing away of our communal fabric, the bonds of responsibility –
I am moved to challenge this system,
to call it out as false and dangerous,
to try to help clear the space and promote the imagination
of how things can be different.

When I stand in this question:
what shall we do with the grace we have been given?
life is better.
joy dances and sings.
I'm ready to be alive.

Friends, I know this isn't easy.

I know that the map of consumerist capitalism is strong, seductive, powerful.
Everyone around you is using it,
and you know how to read it.
It might feel like the spirit map is in another language,
and you don't know how to read it.
I know.

And when we are hurting,
when those we love are hurting,
when we are scared, it's hard to change.
We hunker down, withdraw.

Friends, I know this isn't easy.
[story – colleague underwater, debt – what has happened to me?]
but it isn't just her, it is as many as half of us are underwater on our homes.
it was hard even for her to step away from her own individual story
and see that it wasn't her fault
the economy is bad, and it isn't any one person's fault,
and it certainly isn't the fault of anyone who lives in Rockford, Illinois.

I don't know when it is going to get better.
Many have already made hard adjustments to the new reality,
and some still will have to do so in the months, years to come.

I don't have easy answers.
I do know that every day is a gift,
and yet also, every day, we might forget and use the old map.
It's a constant struggle.

But what I do know is that you are loved –
by the spirit, by the people here, by me.
and you are sacred.
you are worthy,
regardless of anything.
Of anything.

Life is a gift, your body and mind and abilities are gifts.
What will you do with them?
What life will you build? What kind of world will we build together?

I don't have easy answers.
I know we need a better map,
I know that sometimes, some of us have enough,
I know that sometimes, some of us don't.
I know work matters, but it isn't everything.
I know the trilliums and the rustling leaves don't cost a cent.
I know that whoever you are and whatever you have, or don't,
you are my brother, my sister,

I know that we do better when we stand together,
and I know that it feels good to sing.