

An Economy of Thanks

November 24, 2024

Economics

A few years ago, as I was part of planning an ecumenical Thanksgiving service, I was tasked with reaching out to the Oneida Cultural Heritage Center to invite someone from their community to be that year's keynote speaker. The instinct was good – to seek out a breadth of voices, right? It's part of loving our neighbor as ourselves, right?

And yet, with every phone call and email that I made, I found myself stuttering and stammering over the invitation. “Would you, or someone else in the community, be interested in reflecting on Thanksgiving...I mean on giving thanks...you know, on gratitude...in this service that will feature all eurocentric music and culminate in the eating of pumpkin pie?”

As I made the ask, it became increasingly awkward. I knew of the movement to decolonize Thanksgiving. I even wrote about it to our congregation a few years ago. And yet, I hadn't fully grasped just how insensitive it would be to invite a member of a First Nation community to speak at a Thanksgiving service until I was in the midst of doing it.

As we gather today at the head of the week that our nation celebrates Thanksgiving, in a year that I know a lot of folks' minds are still mired in fear and dread rather than joy and thanksgiving, this exchange still haunts me. Pausing to give thanks is always a good thing, but my experience of inviting an indigenous person to speak at a Thanksgiving celebration reminds me that the work that needs to be done to transform this world into the kingdom of God is much deeper than simply plugging a brown person into our rituals, it's more than hanging a rainbow on the church sign, it's more than electing a black president. It's radically re-shaping how we look at the world.

So, let's start with a little economics. (I can hear your eyes rolling to the back of your head, but I promise this is interesting!) Being somewhat of a geek, I was a voracious news consumer already by the time I was 11. I would read the newspaper and watch the news every night as my mom made dinner. I'm not remembering whether it was 1984 or 1985 when I realized that the economy was a lie. It was the Christmas season, and the lead story for days on end was what an awful season it was turning out to be, because stores' sales were only up a few percent.

What? They're UP. You've sold more than ever before, but somehow, because sales haven't grown at an even higher rate, we're being told that it is a calamity. I was positively outraged! This is manufactured pessimism, made up doom and gloom. Watching the news that season might have been what sowed the seeds of skepticism in me. Something didn't smell right.

Fast forward 40 years to our Worship Ministry meeting last week. It was Betty Bienash's turn to lead us in prayer, and she shared musings around an interview she had just listened to featuring Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist, author, and member of the Potowatomi nation. Kimmerer used her observations of the serviceberry bush to frame an argument for a vastly different understanding of the economy than the conventional one that has been giving me angst since the Cabbage Patch riots of the early 1980s. She lays out the conundrum thus:

“Why then have we have permitted the dominance of economic systems that commoditize everything? That create scarcity instead of abundance, that promote

accumulation rather than sharing? We've surrendered our values to an economic system that actively harms what we love."

In her analysis, the core of the problem lies in the fact that conventional western economics is rooted in scarcity. According to the American Economic Association, economics is "the study of scarcity and how people use resources and respond to incentives." As climate change decimates our planet home, wars rage, and millions vote for charlatans and hucksters under the guise that the enemy is somehow the immigrant rather than the overlord, Kimmerer suggests that we need to completely revolutionize our understanding of economics. Rather than organizing ourselves around scarcity, she looks to the natural world to advocate for ecological economics, which she says has two main principles, gratitude and reciprocity.

"Gratitude is so much more than a polite 'thank you.' It is the thread that connects us in a deep relationship, simultaneously physical and spiritual, as our bodies are fed and spirits nourished by the sense of belonging, which is the most vital of foods. Gratitude creates a sense of abundance, the knowing that you have what you need. In that climate of sufficiency, our hunger for more abates and we take only what we need out of respect for the generosity of the giver."

She goes on:

"If our first response is gratitude, then our second is reciprocity: to give a gift in return. What could I give these plants in return for their generosity? It could be a direct response, like weeding or water or a song of thanks that sends appreciation out on the wind. Or indirect, like donating to my local land trust so that more habitat for the gift givers will be saved, or making art that invites others into the web of reciprocity."

The Scriptures

This bears itself out in our scriptures. Our Psalm this morning is a song of gratitude and thanksgiving, a song of restoration:

"May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy."

(Psalm 126:5-6)

It's nice, perhaps even comforting, but it gains tremendous depth once you put it into context. It is one of the Psalms that was written after the Babylonian Exile, which means it was written after the Jewish people had been captured, carried off into slavery, and then had returned to Israel generations later. Their entire civilization had been decimated, but eventually their fortunes reversed. This Psalm is written with that hindsight. The Psalmist writes of laughter and joy and gratitude in the face of restoration.

Our Gospel is also a cautionary tale against a scarcity mindset. Don't worry, don't center yourselves on the gathering up of things, but rather on the kingdom of God. And if you remember Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God, they're all about relationship and mutual flourishing, they're about extending healing and hope as broadly as possible, not keeping it all for oneself.

Thanksgiving

Where botanist Kimmerer finds the roots of this alternative economic model in ecology, renowned UCC theologian Walter Bruggemann finds the same dynamics in scripture. Throughout the Bible, Bruggemann says Biblical gratitude is rooted in giving thanks out loud and materially offering from what we have. These mirror Kimmerer's dynamics of gratitude and reciprocity.

For both scholars, relationship is key. As Kimmerer states:

“To name the world as gift is to feel one's membership in the web of reciprocity. It makes you happy—and it makes you accountable. Conceiving of something as a gift changes your relationship to it in a profound way, even though the physical makeup of the ‘thing’ has not changed. A woolly knit hat that you purchase at the store will keep you warm regardless of its origin, but if it was hand knit by your favorite auntie, then you are in relationship to that ‘thing’ in a very different way: you are responsible for it, and your gratitude has motive force in the world. You're likely to take much better care of the gift hat than the commodity hat, because it is knit of relationships.”

Kimmerer goes on:

“This is the power of gift thinking. I imagine if we acknowledged that everything we consume is the gift of Mother Earth, we would take better care of what we are given. Mistreating a gift has emotional and ethical gravity as well as ecological resonance.

Conclusion

Friends, I started off today talking about how awkward it was to invite representatives from the Oneida Nation to speak at a Thanksgiving celebration as well as how difficult it is to preach about giving thanks at a time when so many of our congregants are in a bad place psycho-spiritually. Our scriptures coupled with Robin Wall Kimmerer's reflection on the economics of the serviceberry offer some meaningful lenses through which to view both.

A Native American speaker isn't going to magically neutralize the baggage that our national celebration of Thanksgiving carries, and the results of the election have exposed the reality that our social foundation isn't just cracked, there are huge fissures in it. Don't get me wrong, paying attention to the real here and now needs of vulnerable and marginalized populations is going to be critical in the next four years. We have a moral and ethical obligation to protect the vulnerable among us.

But even more, we need to be about completely re-orienting ourselves away from organizing around the principle of scarcity. Until we understand that “hoarding won't save us” and that “all flourishing is mutual,” we will be bound to patterns of greed and control.

“Greed, division, supremacy, hierarchies of value — they are deadly and will be the death of us, unless we repattern that toxicity out. And we can repattern. We can heal, with and for each other.”

(Rev. Anna Blaedel)

So our homework today is complex and nuanced. First, spend some time this week giving thanks. Not merely going around the Thanksgiving table and naming one thing you're grateful for, but grounding yourself in the twin notions of abundance and sufficiency. Second, commit yourself to actively practicing reciprocity; that is, to expanding others' experience of abundance and sufficiency and doing so as an act of gratitude for what you have received.

If that's too idealistic for you, I'll leave you with this: You know the hymn we're about to sing, "Now Thank We All Our God"? It's a favorite of many. What you may not know is that:

"this warm, intimate, trusting poetry was written by Pastor Martin Rinkart as a table grace during the Thirty Years War that devastated all of Europe. His wife had died of the pestilence and he wrote this for his children. The hymn affirms that we are all on the receiving end of God's goodness even in the most dire of circumstances."

(Bruggemann)

We're being called to root ourselves in gratitude and reciprocity, even in the darkest of times. When we do, we will be moving not only ourselves but our world ever closer to the kingdom of God, something that can inspire all of creation to respond, Alleluia and Amen.

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Psalm 126, Matthew 6:25-33
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