

The economy of God - Abundance!

If you're like me, your favorite kind of question is the rhetorical kind, the one with the obvious answer you don't have to study for the night before. Homer Simpson might call them "duh" questions. Jesus' teachings include some rhetorical questions, a technique he learned from the sages of Israel who came before him:

- "Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?"
- "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?"
- "Is there anyone among you, who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?"

However, Jesus' distinctive voice comes through more clearly in his "impossible questions":

"What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

"Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?"

"If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?"

"If you love those who love you what reward do you have?"

And from today's reading:

"Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?"

Impossible questions annoy and even anger people. Why? Because they make us scramble for answers and doubt our most basic assumptions. If you're anything like me, I dislike doing both those things.

If Jesus had stuck with rhetorical questions, questions with obvious answers that listeners like to answer, he might have lived longer. But Jesus was a subversive sage, undercutting the comfortable assumptions of his audiences. Jesus' distinctive teaching comes through in the way he coins sayings that conform to traditional wisdom like beatitudes and proverbs, but uses them not to resolve the conflicts of life but to heighten them.

For example: Do not worry?? You've got to be joking. Most days, life feels like one worry strung after another... Worries at work, worries at home, worries about our health or a loved ones, worries about our finances or the wider economy. Worries attend us like bees to honey.

We live in an incredibly anxious culture. Our 24/7 breaking news certainly depends upon worries at home and abroad to attract viewers. Everywhere you turn, everywhere you look, there are visible reminders of just how much there is to worry about.

So how in the world, then, can Jesus possibly ask us -- really, command us! -- not to worry?

Wait a second, though. Today's passage doesn't start with the injunction about worry. No, it starts with an assertion that we cannot serve two masters, both God and money. If we try, Jesus says, we'll end up loving one and hating the other. So what's the connection? Jesus doesn't say money is evil, or even bad, just that it makes a poor master. The Greek word is *kurios*, often translated "lord." The lord is the one who demands and deserves your loyalty, allegiance, and worship. (Which, incidentally, explains the courageous and treasonous nature of the earliest Christian confession, "Christ is Lord" in a world where the more expected confession was, "Caesar is Lord.")

So why can't we give our allegiance and worship to money? Because to do so is to fall prey to the larger worldview that crowns money lord in the first place: that worldview is called scarcity. And that is the connection. Once we believe that money can satisfy our deepest needs, then we suddenly discover that we will never have enough. Money, after all, is finite. And once we decide money grants security, then we are ushered immediately into a world of counting, tracking, and stock piling. No wonder we worry - in a world of scarcity, there is simply never enough.

The alternative worldview Jesus invites us to consider is abundance. He invites us to enter into relationship with God, the God who is infinite and whose love for us and for all of creation is infinite. Love operates in a different way, a different "economy". When our second child came along, I didn't divide my love for our first child between the two, I suddenly had more love, more than I could possibly have imagined before. No doubt you've noticed the same thing: how the more love you give away, the more you have. Love -- and especially God's love -- cannot be counted, tracked or stockpiled. And when you live in this kind of relationship of love and trust, you've entered into the realm of abundance, the world of possibility, the world of contentment. Suddenly, in this world -- Jesus calls it the "kingdom of God" -- not worrying actually becomes an option.

Now I know, it's hard to believe in this world of abundance that Jesus proclaims, this world that invites us to trust God's faithfulness like a flower does spring or to sail upon the currents of God's love like a bird does the air. This is why, in the end, Jesus dies -- not to somehow pay for our sins (there we go tracking and counting again), but because those in power were so invested in the world of scarcity that abundance was down right frightening, even threatening. Scarcity, after all, creates fear, and fear creates devotion to those who will protect you. Abundance, on the other hand, produces freedom. So rather than imagine Jesus' world of abundance, the rulers of Jesus' day put him to death, committed to keeping the power they derived from a fear born of scarcity.

However, God doesn't operate from scarcity; God operates out of abundance. So in response to the crucifixion of God's Son, God does not, in fact, keep track, or look for payment, or hoard power with which to destroy the offenders; instead, God resurrects -- which, when you think about it, is the ultimate act of abundance: drawing light from darkness, giving life to the dead.

This is the world Jesus invites us into: a world of abundance, generosity, and new life. But it is also a world of fragility, trust, and vulnerability. Lilies and birds, after all, can't defend themselves but must trust God's providence and love.

If you're anything like me you will resist this passage. I do, I still want to make a case for being able to serve two masters, for the need for anxiety, for the integrity of security as the project of my life. But this young teacher's impossible questions make it impossible for me to go forward without doubting where I've been. That's what makes them so very annoying.

Tim