

Sabbath Economics

Leviticus 27:30-34; Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Luke 4:16-21

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, (Oct. 7) 2018

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Maria Fernandes died for the sake of a nap. In a small news item, easily overlooked, the story said the 32-year-old held three part-time jobs, and between shifts at two different Dunkin' Donuts locations she stopped in a parking lot in Elizabeth, New Jersey, to sleep in her car. Apparently, a spilled gas can which Maria carried in the trunk of her car because she was always worrying over running out of gas which would make her late for work, which could easily get her fired from one of her jobs, and exhaust from her vehicle ended her life on August 25, 2017. According to her manager, this was the first time Fernandes failed to show up or answer her phone (Benjamin Dueholm, *Christian Century*, Nov. 14, 2017).

Fernandes was part of what some economists call the real face of the global economy: 7.5 million American workers cobbling together a living from part-time jobs. We are not even talking about the people struggling in other parts of the world. This is the economics of our world today. This is life today. Working as hard as you can, as long as you can, as fast as you can, at one job that is not enough. So when finishing one job, you rush out the door to go to the next job, and then after that to the third job. Somewhere, somehow you grab a moment of sleep, and you gobble down some fast food while you drive to the next job. And you do this hour after hour, day after day, seven days a week, just to survive, just to put food on the table, just to pay the rent – if you're not living in your car.

For many of us, it's not three part-time jobs but it's working longer hours for the same pay we're supposed to get for a regular full-time job. We're working longer and harder. If we have health insurance and retirement we consider ourselves lucky. Those benefits used to be a standard part of our employment but now they have been privatized. We come home exhausted and tend to the other myriad tasks of living: taking care of kids, taking care of aging parents, fixing meals, shopping for meals, taking the car to the shop, mowing the grass, arguing and advocating over the phone – after long waits on hold – or arguing and advocating online to get minimal health insurance help, to correct our phone bill, to correct a credit card bill, even to talk to a real live human-being instead of a computer ... to get anything done seems to monumental effort and lots of time – which we don't have.

Every day, day after day – it's what theologian Miroslav Volf calls “low-intensity evil” (*Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 87-88). We're chronically tired, chronically over-extended, and our simmering frustration can easily turn into full-throated rage when some historians tell us how nice and good it used to be, economists tell of present exploitation but how tax cuts for the wealthy will benefit us all, cultural anthropologists talk about our loss of identity, politicians tell us we need to learn be on our own and but there are many threats out there ready to take away our liberty, and the priests and preachers tell us God is on the side of those at the top of the pyramid and our job is to get on that same side. Meanwhile, social media and talking heads on television reinforce all of this and more, constantly, constantly, constantly harping that we're under threat, our global economy is under threat and we might lose what jobs we have. So we

work harder and work longer, always with one eye looking around us at who might be a threat to us.

It's called the global economy, globalization, capitalism, the good life. The Bible calls it the brickyard, calls it Pharaoh, Egypt, bondage, slavery. No time, no rest. No neighbors.

No neighbors because no one has time to be neighborly. No neighbors, just competitors for my job or someone who might report me to the taskmaster. There is no such thing as neighbors in Pharaoh's economy. In Egypt.

Pharaoh says this is just the way it is. But God says, "It doesn't have to be like this."

Our Scripture readings this morning come from God trying to show us how to resist Pharaoh and how to embody an alternative. The two Old Testament readings: one on tithing from Leviticus and one on Sabbath-keeping from Deuteronomy are about money and time.

Time and money: the two things we never have enough of in Egypt. And if we have any, it is because we made it, worked for it, saved it, managed it, or controlled it.

But to these people Moses leads out of Egypt, God says, "Time and money are not things you earn. They are gifts I give to you. And you are given them for the benefit of your neighbors and yourself."

Out in the wilderness on the journey from the anxiety and exhaustion of Pharaoh to the promise of a new future, God begins to teach the people how to live differently.

Up on the mountain God gives them/us the Big Ten. Ten basic rules for learning how to be neighborly. And right in the middle is the lynchpin: Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Do this because God kept a Sabbath when creating the world and creating you (see Exodus 20).

In Pharaoh's system there is no Sabbath. There are no limits. There is no rest. There is only work and only the insatiable anxiety of making more bricks. In God's system, however, there are limits. There is rest. Weekly we are to break the production cycle. Weekly we are to break the anxiety cycle.

We get out of the system of Pharaoh but then what? We get out in the middle of nowhere and don't know how or what we're going to eat. Maybe old Pharaoh is not so bad; at least, we ate regularly. But out in nowhere, God shows us that it's not what we earn, it's what we are given and God sends us manna – a bread-like substance that comes every morning and we are instructed to gather only as much as we need for that day. Not too little. Not too much. Just enough for that day. And we can't accumulate it because it'll rot. Trust God instead.

And out here in the middle of nowhere, God says on the Sabbath don't gather manna for there won't be any. On the day before there will be enough for two days. Even in the middle of the precariousness of the wilderness there is still Sabbath rest (see Exodus 16).

We get to the edge of the promise and Moses has us pause. He goes over everything again. That's why it's called Deuteronomy (which means "to repeat" or "to copy" the Law). But when Moses tells us again to remember the Sabbath, this time it's not because we remember God as creator but because in practicing Sabbath we remember that we used to be slaves in the global economic anxiety system of Pharaoh but now we're free. Therefore, all work stops because "your slave, your servant, your donkey, your immigrant" – everyone is to stop work and rest. All are social equals on the Sabbath.

Leviticus, which is made up of further reflections and rules for learning to live as neighbors, tells us to tithe, give a tenth. Tithing is a further reminder of limits, and a curb to the old Pharaoh habit of insatiableness – we give to God the first tenth. And second, it is a reminder that all we have in the first place is given by God. We didn't earn it; God gave it.

Tithing is not a legalistic rule to be held over our heads. It's not a way to buy our way into heaven. Tithing is a guide to help us learn the limits of Pharaoh's way and remember again that all we have is a gift of a loving God. So we give back a tithe, a portion.

The rest of the Bible is elaboration and development of God's Ways in contrast to the Pharaoh way.

Jesus even announces at the beginning of his ministry in Luke 4 that he has come to announce and begin the Year of the Lord. That is, the Jubilee. That is the Sabbath of Sabbaths when all debts are canceled, all land is fallow, all slaves are freed, all prisoners are released, and everything is restarted, rebooted

as God's Way, the Jesus Way, where we are able to practice loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves, all the time. It is Sabbath economics – economics as if God and neighbors matter.

Time and money are gifts of God. We practice Sabbath rest. We practice tithe giving. This is because God gives us all we have and calls us to be a community, a church that not only resists Pharaoh but also practices an alternative to Pharaoh. So we can have time and money to share with our neighbors.

Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.

Invitation to the Table:

Now we come to this central practice of our faith. We call it “thanks.” The old word often still used is “Eucharist,” which is from the Greek meaning “thanks.” Sharing in this meal is not an accomplishment, achievement, or something earned. It is a gift of God. Central to all we are as a community in Christ is this sharing around the table called “thanks.”

Remember that we do not “take” the Eucharist. We receive it. And we share it with our neighbor. So the deacons will serve you and after you’ve received, you turn and share with the person beside you saying, “This is the body of Christ given for you.” And, “This is the blood of Christ poured out for you.” After everyone has received you may make your way back to your seats so the next group can come up. Please come.

Prayers of Concerns and Celebrations:

Loving God, hear our prayers this morning...

We count our days, we count the hours, we count the minutes, we count our pennies, we count our ways, and we count our fears. This morning, help us to count our blessings.

Our minutes and hours and days are filled with ourselves and our work and our agendas, our worries, and our busyness. We confess that we rarely have time for You, O God, and we rarely have time for our neighbors. Nevertheless this morning, we are here, mindful of You and surrounded by our neighbors. We gather to worship You; all we have and all we are, are in Your hands. Please take our calendars and fill them with You and our neighbors. Take our checkbooks, our cards, our gadgets, and our budgets and fill them with You and neighbors.

Through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...