

As yourself, love your neighbor

A sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Our basic Reformation theme in this Pentecost season is from John 8:36: "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." How does that work? How does the Christian life work?

Today we will look at economics. For those who say: "Well, all you do is take what the Bible says," let us take up Matthew 5:39-42 on the Sermon on the Mount:

"Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you."

The text does not mention interest on money loaned, or security; it doesn't allow for those things. For those who say they are going to live by what the Bible says, well, that's what it says plainly. Nor does it stop there.

Matthew 19:16-22 has the famous account of the young man who came to Jesus and said: "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus answers: Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." The young man asks: "Which ones?" Jesus lists them, including love your neighbor as yourself. The young man says: "I've kept them all since my youth." Then comes the kicker: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what that you have and give it to the poor and come follow me." Well that didn't work for the young man because he had great wealth.

Immediately following in Matt 5:23: "Jesus said to his disciples . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Consider also 1 John 3:17-18: "If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth."

And 1 Timothy 6:10: "For the love of money is the root of all evils (not "all kinds of evil," as some modern versions have it, which is interpretation rather than translation).

So I expect, because everyone in this room belongs at least in the upper 20% of the economy of the world, and there are 20% starving and in desperate straits in the world, to see many of us divesting ourselves of our possessions because the Bible says: "If there is anybody in need, help him." It doesn't say: As it works out, or as you feel like it, or even 10%. Nor does the New Testament stop there.

The second half of Luke's writings (the Gospel of Luke is the first half), that is, the Book of Acts, describes the life of the early church. It says they not only gathered together for worship and to

celebrate communion, but also: “They had all things in common. They sold their possessions and distributed them to all as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45).

It goes on in chapter 4:32: “[N]o one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own but they had everything in common.” Following this, in Acts 5 there is the story of Ananias and Sapphira who tried to cheat and died. It’s very serious business. Then this whole idea disappears from the record, this early Christian communism. It could be said that maybe it continues in monasticism. Monasticism, of course, has a very checkered history of corruption and reform.

What do we say to this? It’s very simple, very plain. Starting with the Seventh Commandment: “You shall not steal.” That is basic to understanding that there is that which is private property. Life works only if there is private property and that private property is respected. That’s what the Seventh Commandment is about. It’s a very practical commandment.

Of course there have been those who have tried throughout history to get around this commandment. In modern times, that is, the last couple of hundred years, there have been those who have said we should really have everything in common. The slogan of this movement, which we generally call socialism, has been: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.”

We recall the cynical statement by people in the Soviet Union saying: “We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us.” It gets into trouble right away.

George Orwell wrote a famous book, *Animal Farm*. As you recall the animals take over the farm. Before long the smartest animals, the pigs, take over. Their beginning slogan: “All animals are equal,” is altered by the end of the story to say: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.”

What do we say about all this? When we talk about economics, sometimes people call it a science. It’s not a science, but economics is also not an art. Economics is tied to the whole sweep of the human situation. It is about how individuals and society flourish.

Economics can be understood in terms of polarities. On the one hand, in 1776 Adam Smith wrote the famous book, *The Wealth of Nations*, which shows about how decisions made by self-interested sellers and buyers in the free market results in greater prosperity for all. This free-market view is usually contrasted with the modern thinker, Maynard Keynes, who in the last century advocated for the managed economy. Of course neither the free market nor the managed economy exists in pure form and that’s a problem in terms of how do things work.

Economics really cannot be separated from politics. Economics and politics go together because they are about what it means to be human and live together.

On the one hand, in 1651 Thomas Hobbes wrote *The Leviathan*, which says that life outside of organized society is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” That’s one view of the human

situation. An opposing view is represented by the Frenchman, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who wrote about the noble savage and the pure state of nature, and how what we need to do is live by education because we can make things work if we just have the right knowledge and follow our instincts.

Economics is sometimes described as a polarity between Machiavelli, the political philosopher, Luther's contemporary, who wrote about the way life really works (dog eat dog), and the English philosopher, John Locke, who wrote about how we're born as a blank slate on which anything can be written, and we just have to manage it.

What do we say to all this? We are not trying to be experts in economics. Not the pastor individually or the church. But we have one decisive insight, which is that when we're dealing with human nature, we're dealing with sin, and that's the problem.

It can be seen in the modern problem of street beggars. What should one do about them? The worst thing you can do is give them money because it most likely goes to alcohol and drugs, and they need to be in some kind of care. They should not be there at all. That's one side of it. People who are in a situation of receiving become dependent.

One of the seven deadly sins, and that's not a list from the Bible but from the sixth century, is the problem of sloth. We don't use that word, but we use the word laziness. **Laziness is really talking about the Seventh Commandment on stealing.** People who are lazy are stealing. On the one hand, they're stealing from others because they don't do what's needed, and what they should be doing. That's the one side, there's the basic problem of sin, sloth, and dependency.

On the other hand, as in the story of *Le Miserables*, which tells the story of Jean Valjean, who stole bread because he was starving and was then hunted for decades by the ruthless policeman Javert, we say: "That stealing is not as serious as other stealing, but it is breaking the Seventh Commandment." We know there are those who are caught in dire circumstances, and we talk loosely about a safety net because they need to be helped.

What do we say to this as Christians? We come back to the matter of law and gospel, that is, the matter of God's two kingdoms: On matters of salvation, we do not use reason (God's right-hand kingdom), but in matters of the general life we live (God's left-hand kingdom), we're given reason to live by. Because sin infects everything, even reason is broken and limited. The ancient Greeks talked about nemesis (fate), but we know it's sin.

There is sin in every way human beings live. It can be illustrated in politics by that famous observation of Winston Churchill: "Democracy is the worst form of government, except compared to all the rest."

In this country we have *constitutional* democracy, or a republic, which is different. The same is true for economics. One of the smartest thinkers in the US, Thomas Sowell, wrote a book, *The Vision of the Anointed* (1994). The book is about well-intentioned visionaries, who set up systems that control others for "the greater good," and say: "We're really doing this for your

benefit. We can manage society for the good of all.” As a result, they do great harm because they imagine they are smarter and wiser than others and can get around the problem of evil, human selfishness, and sin.

Because of the Lutheran insight into the nature of the human situation, we are called to see through all this, to be practical, to see what works, as Paul writes in Romans 13:10: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to the neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

What we ask, as we look at all of this is: What minimizes harm? The idea that we’re going to build a perfect system, that we’re going to build the Kingdom of God on earth, is itself a sin. Then we’re trying to be God. The cross is a big “No” to that project. The cross turns us around, calls us back to earth to care for others using common reason, as the situation requires.

To come back to the New Testament and to the Apostle Paul. He writes: “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). This text is not a social program, a grand vision for society; here the context is baptism. In no way does the New Testament say there are no more males or females. The New Testament has a very big investment in the family.

For example, in no way does the New Testament try to oppose slavery. In fact, in later writings in the Pauline school in Colossians and Ephesians each has what is called a table of duties. In the world of the time everybody, not just Christians, had on the wall a list of the rules for life. In Colossians 3:2 and Ephesians 6:5 the table of duties include husbands be good to your wives, wives obey your husbands, and slaves obey your masters. Christians did not start a social revolution. They were not for chaos, but they were for asking how to make life work, how to lessen harm, how to restrain evil.

How then do we live in our own day? Like them, we live by reason and forgiveness. This doesn’t mean cheap grace. The cross was not cheap grace. The cross also means that we are not building the Kingdom of God on earth. Instead, we are called to use common reason to sort out life in this world. What is definitive is God’s right-hand kingdom, where his grace and forgiveness are ours because we are in him. Amen