

For the past few weeks we’ve been in a sermon series called “Things the Bible Doesn’t Talk About.” Today we wrap up this series by focusing on something the Bible could never have talked directly about because it didn’t exist as a theory until at least the 16th century: Capitalism.

Before I read our Scripture, I want to say a couple of things. First – about why I chose this topic. And – secondly – about why this topic rarely gets preached.

First, though the Bible doesn’t say anything directly about the idea of the economic theory and systems we know as capitalism, one of the things the Bible says a WHOLE love about is money – or possessions. In fact, one could argue that it’s pretty ironic that what the church has been focused on and arguing about so much for the past 100+ years particularly: matters of sexuality, debates about reproductive rights, whether to read certain parts of the Bible literally...is in many ways a way we keep ourselves distracted from what the Bible spends a lot more time talking about: money...and how our faith in God and Jesus should shape the role that money plays in our lives.

Couple that with the place that capitalism plays in our lives – for us it is the air we breathe, the way we understand what it means to be an American, and the engine that drives so many of our thoughts and decisions – and I thought a sermon that holds up both the Bible and capitalism might be...I don’t know...relevant?

Second, the reason there aren’t a whole lot of sermons preached about capitalism is because they tend to make people get defensive and mad. When I started as the pastor here almost twelve years ago, one of the first things I did was go meet different members for lots of coffee and lunch and ask them about their experience of their church. 95% of what I heard was positive – especially about my predecessor and our pastor emeritus, the Rev. Dr. Bill Wood – who was, and still is, beloved.

Bill served this church for 27 years and helped us grow – spiritually, numerically, and financially. He was an effective preacher who wove his intellect and current scholarship into the biblical text; people say that a Bill Wood sermon always helped them learn something.

Which is why I was a little surprised to hear – from a few different people – some criticism of the same particular sermon that Bill had preached...at the time I was hearing about it...four years before. (I don’t have a clue what I preached four weeks ago, and these people were still upset about a sermon that Bill had preached four YEARS before).

You can guess what that sermon was about – capitalism. Specifically, a warning about what can happen if capitalism goes unchecked. Bill preached that sermon in 2008 – in the midst of an economic crisis, which was a tender time to be sure. But as a 35-year-old newly minted Senior Pastor of a big important church in one of

“Things the Bible Doesn’t Talk About: Capitalism”

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the largest banking cities in the country, I took it as a warning. I remember thinking: “Welp...let’s take that topic off the table!”

To ease anyone’s concerns: I am a fan of capitalism. I am very aware that I am a beneficiary of capitalism (as is our church). This is not a sermon that will naively call into question a system in which many of you work and that, is by most informed accounts, the best and most effective approach to economics in the history of the world.

But what capitalism isn’t is God.

It is not to be worshipped.

And it – like everything else – is subject to God’s word.

So that’s what we’re going to spend some time doing this morning – letting God’s word be the lens through which we see this theory that we all practice that helps us earn money and build wealth.

Before we do that – PLEASE join me in prayer – and then be centered by the choir: *God of life, center us now in your word. By your Spirit, open us to hear a wisdom that goes beyond what we think we know. And remind us that you are merciful, and gentle, and generous toward those like us who bear your image. We ask it in Jesus’s name. Amen.*

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A reading from Acts 4:32-37. This takes place after Jesus ascended into heaven in the earliest days of what we now know as the Church. Listen with me for the word of God...

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means ‘son of encouragement’). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

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I don’t know if you noticed, but that doesn’t sound a whole lot like capitalism.

If reading the Bible were an easy and unreflective exercise, this sermon might be as simple and short as to say that if Jesus’s earliest followers could practice this kind of radical sharing, then we should be able to do the same. Any questions? Good! Let’s break early and beat the Baptists to lunch. We’ll let them pick up the bill, since we’re sharing and all.

Conversely, if reading the Bible were simply an academic exercise than maybe I should tell you that a lot of scholars believe this idealized vision of the way the earliest of Jesus’s followers shared their belongings didn’t actually happen¹. That it was the writer of Acts attempt to shape the behavior of future generations of disciples. A sermon this direction might be equally short: Y’all just keep these things the Bible says in mind but don’t take them so seriously that actually changes your behavior. That kind of thing isn’t really possible anyway.

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Honestly, when I read today’s Scripture in preparation for this sermon my thoughts ran toward one of church’s global partners – a seminary in Cuba.

Cuba’s economy (and government), of course, is communist – a reaction to the perceived shortcomings of capitalism. It is an economy that is designed to share wealth. Lucy and I were in Cuba a couple of months ago. I can tell you that the idea of communism doesn’t work. Decaying infrastructure, food and medicine shortages, government corruption, a system that discourages upward mobility, smart and ambitious Cubans rushing find passage out of the country to establish themselves and their families elsewhere. It may be true that there is less economic inequality in Cuba than in the United States, but that’s not exactly preferable if the lowest common denominator is so low that everyone feels like they are poor.

In spending time with our partners in Cuba – Dr. Carlos Ham, the outgoing President of the Seminary, and Dr. Ary Fernandez, the incoming President – as well as other leaders in the Cuban Presbyterian church – what I found interesting was what it was like for a person of faith to live in the midst of an economy that so clearly wasn’t working. For our Cuban friends, the issue is urgent. The crisis is real and felt by the entire country. There is understandably more focus on the immediate needs of basic goods and services for survival than on reflections about the efficacy of an economic system – but what I notice in my conversations with my Cuban brothers and sisters in Christ is that even in the midst of the very real scarcity that they face, there is little criticism of the economy that is a main reason for that scarcity. Faith informs their compassionate response to those in need, and it gives them a source of hope as they look into an otherwise bleak future...but, at least in my experience of them, faith doesn’t seem to lead to questions about the fundamentals of an economy that is broken.

¹ As found in Dr. Justo Gonzalez’s commentary on Acts, *Acts: Gospel of the Spirit*.

That part is just accepted as fact – probably because, in Cuba, the way they structure their economy has become – over the years – just like the air they breathe. And it is difficult to think critically and differently about something that has just always felt normal.

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In our context, it is hard to precisely describe the idea of capitalism that we have come to accept as normal in our daily lives because there are many forms of it, and there is a lot of history...from the earliest days of the industrial revolution that jump-started this idea to the place we are now.

Since this is a sermon and not an economics lecture, suffice it to say that when I talk about capitalism it has some of the following features:

- An assumption that profit and accumulation is the implicit purpose in production
- The primacy of private ownership as the means of production
- The goal of corporations to maximize profit for shareholders
- Creating an environment that allows the laws of supply and demand to determine value

I better stop before I get too far over my skis, but you get the point. These are all characteristics of the way our economy works that we consider normal. They help give our culture its shape – where there is opportunity, and an encouragement to innovate, and competition to help make our ideas better.

There are challenges, too. One of the things that capitalism can do is privilege profits over people. Economic inequality is an assumed outcome when the economy is set up to be a competition. Another thing that can happen when the goal of business is to maximize profit is that – by extension it can become the goal and purpose of **our** life. And when the goal of our life becomes earning more and owning more – the irony is that we, in turn, **are owned** by the things we try to accumulate.

I think these challenges can be difficult for us to see. They can be difficult to talk about because we all benefit from the ways our economy is set up. The truth is, there are lots of different kinds of capitalism – no form is really “purely” capitalism, precisely because of some of the challenges I have mentioned. Ours is actually a somewhat mixed economy – capitalism mixed with some other controls to help protect the people who make the economy work. The political debates we have in our country aren’t about whether to be capitalists or not – the debate is around the degree to which our capitalism should be mixed.

I’m not about to claim I know the answer to that question.

But what I do want to claim this morning is that our faith can lead us to ask important questions that can help us with those answers – if we let it. The challenge that I think we face as people of faith in our country are

actually similar to those that I saw in what our brothers and sisters in Christ in Cuba faced: we have to decide in what order will be look at things.

Will we look at our faith through the lens of our economy?
Or will we look at our economy through the lens of our faith?

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Our Scripture this morning started this way:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.

What we see here in the Scripture isn’t an argument for an economic policy or philosophy. It’s not the basis for a particular party platform, or a condemnation of the free-market. It’s not a blue-print that we are supposed to replicate in every community where the people of God are gathered.

No, it’s a window...a small window...into what it looked like for that group of believers to understand their relationship to their stuff and to one another in light of their faith in the good news of the gospel.

It’s not a prescription.

It’s an example.

An example of what it looked like – for them – to keep the things they owned from becoming too important.

So they shared...everything – that was their strategy.

Why? Well, here is where context matters. They adopted this strategy because they seemed to understand that because Jesus had been talking to them about a future – about a kingdom – where there wasn’t going to be radical inequality, where there wasn’t going to be inescapable poverty, where there wasn’t going to be a lack of opportunity, because in this coming kingdom God was going set things right – was going to raise the valley up – was going make the rough places plain...because they believed that Jesus was – eventually – going to bring about this future – this kingdom –

they seemed to understand that they should let that knowledge of the future impact them in the present.

That they should start practicing for what, one day, would be.

So that’s what they did.

How long did it last (if it ever did)?

We don’t know.

Would it work for us?

I can’t imagine it would – it’s a different time, on a different scale.

The point isn’t to cut and paste the behavior of Jesus’ disciples from 2000 years ago.

But it is to reflect on their wisdom.

And to learn from their questions.

How does our faith put capitalism’s pursuit of owning more things into perspective?

What matters more – our stuff or our relationships...with those we love, with our neighbors, with God?

Do we really believe that God promises us a future where all will be well? Where brokenness will be healed? Where need will be quenched?

And if so, what does that ask of us now? What does that mean for how we share what we have for the sake of others with whom we share a future?

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I think one reason why is because there’s a fear that the preacher is going to tell you what the Bible says about the right way to navigate how we earn, and share, and keep, and think about the resources that flow through our lives...or that the preacher is going to stand up and announce how the Bible endorses or rejects a particular kind of economic practice or philosophy.

But here’s the truth: there isn’t one way to approach it.

There isn’t one, “right” economic model in the Bible.

And there isn’t one, “right” approach to economics in our day, either.

What the good news of the gospel helps us to see is that we are more than the things we own.

More precious.

More worthy.

And that we are connected – one to another – beyond dollars and cents.

Those are the things people of faith have always held in their minds as they made choices about how to approach money.