

**“God’s Ecology of Commerce”**  
**Leviticus 25:18-28; 26:3-5**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**April 26, 2009**

You are summoned to the office and told that your job has been eliminated. You are reassured that this is not because of your performance – you are simply another casualty of an economy turned sour. You are told to gather your things and leave the building immediately. Thank you for your 15 years of service.

You get a letter from your credit card company. The terms offered when you borrowed that money to pay your dental bills, or fix your car, or tide you over when your compensation took an unexpected hit, have changed. It’s all in the fine print – drastic times authorize drastic measures. Your rate hits 29% and the interest that you are paying is outstripping what you are able to pay each month.

You are working in a company that just got hit with massive layoffs. You are one of the lucky ones, or so you thought. Now you are carrying three times the usual workload, competing against people known to you as colleagues, to try to keep from being voted off the corporate island.

Your water heater goes out. Or maybe it’s your washing machine or your refrigerator. Now is the time to do what’s right. To help the earth. To reduce your carbon footprint. And you look at the price tags and wonder why energy efficiency is priced for the privileged. You wonder with the earth in crisis, why are the incentives against doing what is good and right?

We are in a crisis. It is not primarily a mortgage crisis. Or an unemployment crisis. Or even an ecological crisis. For decades we have been consumed by a consumer culture that has eaten away at the very moral foundations of our world. The earth and its people have been turned into commodities to be used by institutions, used by monied interests, used by each other.

Even the church – whose primary metaphor is not one of transaction, not one of markets, but of organism – of interrelatedness – we are the *body* of Christ – our largest churches now look more like Wal-Marts, selling customers cheap spiritual garbage to keep them lazy and disengaged, to keep them disconnected from each other; treating their individualized crises as with spiritual medications dispensed by television preachers to cure them.

We are in a crisis, threatened by a culture of consumerism that has all but eaten us alive.

This is not a new crisis. We’ve been here before. Brought out of Egypt and its brutal economic system of slavery our ancestors in the faith discovered that we are capable of becoming the very oppressors we once opposed. Brought out of an economy in which we had no voice – one that treated the earth as a commodity to be exploited; the Israelites discovered that we, too, can turn creditors into slave-holders just as easily as our enemies; we can abuse the earth just as easily as the taskmasters who once pushed the land to its limits.

This is not a new crisis for followers of the God of Israel. We’ve been here before. We know what it means to be told to make more bricks with less straw. We know what it means to be told our prosperity depends on Pharaoh’s prosperity. We know what it means for the

bricklayers to be blamed for a decrease in benefits with an increase in production. We've been here before. We are accustomed to giving allegiance to a mighty hand that, we are told, moves markets and controls our destiny – a hand that we have been conditioned into thinking we can do nothing about. We've been here before.

Out of Egypt yet threatening to recreate it. Out of slavery, yet threatening to recreate it. Out of abusing the land, yet threatening to recreate it. Out of an economy of the masses serving the interests of a few yet threatening to recreate it. We've been here before.

When the Israelites threatened to become the very monster they once opposed, threatened to recreate the slavery they had been liberated from, threatened to abuse the earth that was given as gift, God gave them a set of rules to live by. A new obedience. A way to live outside of slavery, outside of Pharaoh economics, outside of an economy of production that serves the wealth of a few. God gave them some commandments because God knew that when landless people come into land, when poor people come into wealth, when oppressed people grow into freedom, they are tempted to forget the slavery and its brutality, to forget the hunger and its injustice, to forget that we and the land on which we live are not first commodities to be bought, sold, or managed.

And one of those commandments that forces the Israelites not to forget is the commandment to honor the Sabbath, expounded here in Leviticus in relationship to the land. Every seven years there is to be a complete rest for the land. Every 50 years – one massive Sabbath celebration returns land that was sold in hard times to the family that was sold it. The Jubilee intended to wipe out debts and the slavery that tends to build up around it, to return properties that had to be sold in times of difficulty, to start over again. To give a rest to the earth and to its people. To ensure that every 50 years the people of God would take a hard look at the community they had created and make sure that the people and the land were treated as the gifts that they are.

It is this Jubilee year that ensured that the people of God never forgot that there is no private property in God's economy. The land – like its people - is a gift. As Walter Brueggemann says, "Land is not fully given over to our satiation. Land has its own rights over against us and even its own existence. It is in covenant with us but not totally at our disposal."<sup>1</sup> We are tenant farmers, tilling the soil of a land that does not belong to any of us. We are stewards, managing monies that do not belong to any of us. We are brothers and sisters accountable to a parent that values her children.

There is no private property in God's economy. Land is a gift and we are accountable for what we do with it.

Now it is likely that the Israelites never managed to achieve a community-wide enactment of the jubilee. That the whole society did not give the land a rest every seven years, that land was not returned, that debts were not forgiven. It is possible that many Israelites saw the jubilee as too impossible to practice and they simply gave up. Like many of our neighbors,

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 2002, 59.

perhaps like many of us they thought to themselves, we live in a market culture. Wishing the world were different will not make it so. We buy things and do things that are harmful to the earth because most of the time it's cheaper. We treat people like commodities because the market doesn't give us the freedom to do otherwise. It is likely that the jubilee was not practiced far and wide.

But what is remarkable is that a community of people managed to keep this memory alive. They managed to plant the seeds of sabbath and jubilee in small but important ways generation after generation because they believed that the only way to live, the only way to be saved, was to live as though life is a gift instead of something to be used or managed. To live as though land is a gift instead of something to be used and abused. To live as though their future and our future depended on living like tenant farmers instead of owners of the land and God's people. They planted those seeds because they trusted that with nurture and time, those seeds would take root and a new economy would bear fruits that honor God and the gifts of creation.

We plant those seeds every time we organize against Pharaoh economics that hold an invisible hand in higher esteem than the people that God commands every economy to serve. We plant those seeds every time we resist a culture of commodity that values relationships only for what they can produce. We plant those seeds every time we factor in the full costs to the earth of our lavish living. We plant those seeds every time we ride a bike to work, or plant a tree at home, or practice inefficiency in our friendships, or reach out to another human being with no apparent benefit for doing so. We plant those seeds so that when God's economy does finally flourish, when human beings are valued first and foremost as gifts, when the land is healed from our abuse, the generations that follow will know that though people were getting laid off and dropkicked through the door, though the creditors were reinventing a new kind of slavery, though the economy continued to treat the abuse of the earth as a benefit without much of a cost, there was a community that had not forgotten who bring slaves out of slavery into freedom, who wipes out debts and the slavery that builds up around it, who gives life to the earth and to its people. There was a community learning in small, but important ways, how to live as though life were a gift instead of something to be managed; how to live as though land were a gift instead of something to be used; there was a community planting seeds that would someday bear fruit for God's new economy.