

Economic Justice, God's Vision for Our Household-of-God Economy

Quotations from various thinkers

John Dominic Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer*, HarperCollins, 2010.

To be just means to distribute everything fairly. The primary meaning of "justice" is equitable distribution of *whatever* you have in mind ... God's world must be distributed fairly and equitably among all God's people. ... When the biblical tradition proclaims that revolutionary vision of distributive justice, it is imagining neither liberal democratic principles nor universal human rights. Instead, its vision derives from the common experience of a well-run home, household, or family farm. ... Are the children and dependents well fed, clothed, and sheltered? Are the sick given special care? Are the responsibilities and returns apportioned fairly? Do all have enough? Especially that: Do all have enough? Or, to the contrary, do some have far too little while others have far too much? ... Do all God's children have enough? If not – and the biblical answer is "not" – how must things change here below so that all God's people have a fair, equitable, and just proportion of God's world? (p. 2-3)

Walter Brueggemann, "Voices of the Night – Against Justice." In *To Act Justly, Love Tenderly, Walk Humbly* by Walter Brueggemann, Sharon Parks, and Thomas H. Groome, Paulist Press, 1986.

In biblical faith, the doing of justice is the primary expectation of God [see Micah 6:8]. ... There are, of course, various and conflicting understandings of justice. Let me offer this as a way the Bible thinks about justice: *Justice is to sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them.* Such an understanding implies that there is a right distribution of goods and access to the sources of life. There are certain entitlements that cannot be mocked. Yet through the uneven workings of the historical process, some come to have access to or control of what belongs to others. If we control what belongs to others long enough, we come to think of it as rightly ours, and to forget it belonged to someone else. So the work of liberation, redemption, salvation, is the work of *giving things back*. The Bible knows that when things are alienated from those to whom they belong, here can only be trouble, disorder and death. So God's justice at the outset has a dynamic, transformative quality. It causes things to change, and it expects that things must need change if there is to be abundant life. (italics in the original, p. 5-6)

Also see "The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity" by Walter Brueggemann, *Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999. <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=533>

Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*, Church of the Savior, 2001.

The biblical implications of this tradition [of Sabbath economics] as it is articulated in the Bible can be summarized in three axioms:

- 1) The world as created by God is abundant, with enough for everyone – provided that human communities restrain their appetites and live within limits;
- 2) Disparities in wealth and power are not "natural" but the result of human sin, and must be mitigated within the community of faith through the regular practice of redistribution;
- 3) The prophetic message calls people to the practice of such redistribution, and is thus characterized as "good news" to the poor. (p. 5)

M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist*, Fortress Press, 1989.

As the introduction to almost every contemporary economics textbook shows, one of the most basic assumptions of modern economics is scarcity. Scarcity, it is claimed, is the universal presupposition of exchange relationships. No matter how much society will be able to produce, it is claimed, there will always be scarcity. There is never enough to go around because the human being always wants more. There is no limit to human wanting.

The biblical traditions uncover God as the Economist who constructs the household with a radically different assumption. *If* the righteousness of God is present, there is always enough to go around. From the manna in the desert, to Jesus' feeding of the multitudes, to the Lord's Supper, the biblical traditions depict the superabundance of God's Spirit as the starting point of God's household and its practice of hospitality. (p. 12)

Ownership cannot mean the free choice to do anything one wants to do with property. There can be no such thing as absolute ownership. Property is for use, not holding or hoarding. To be possessed justly, property must be used according to its nature to meet human needs and create human community. God has given human beings authority to use possessions according to these purposes.

Using property justly means the rich are accountable for meeting the essential needs of the poor from their surplus wealth. It is God who has entitled the poor to what they need for life. This led to a harsh conclusion by the early church theologians: The rich are in jeopardy of being thieves. If you claim as your own what is common (*koina*) by right, it is clear that you are forcibly taking what belongs to another. Not to share one's resources, the refusal to take part in redistribution, is robbery. According to Augustine, "The superfluous things of the wealthy are the necessities of the poor." The poor have something like a just lien on the surplus property of the wealthy. Thus if the rich have more than they need and the poor are in urgent need of goods like those the rich possess, the rich have a compensatory obligation in justice to bestow from their surplus goods what is needed to sustain the deprived. [ER adds: not only to "sustain" the deprived but enough to allow them to live in the fullness of life.]

Redistributing possessions is thus basically an act of restitution. "Not from your own do you bestow upon the poor man, but you make return from what is his." (from the *Didache*) According to Aquinas the poor person under the stress of need could be justified in stealing from the rich. Thus does the tradition uphold the original Torah prohibition of property arrangements by which the rich steal from the poor what is the poor's by God's intention. (p. 122)

Fourth century bishop, Ambrose of Milan, in *Duties of the Clergy*

Greed "weakens and lessens the power" of justice. "For as long as we want to add to our possessions and to heap up money, to take into our possession fresh lands, and to be the richest of all, we have cast aside the form of justice and have lost the blessing of kindness towards all. How can he be just that tries to take from another what he wants for himself?" (<http://www.monachos.net/content/patristics/patristictexts/275-ambrose-clergy-link>. Accessed 7/6/11)

William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004

Not only Christians but all Americans subscribe to the notion that "all people are created equal." But how many *feel* the monstrosity of inequality? I'm thinking not only of racial inequality, but also of today's excess of wealth and poverty, the absence of affordable housing that "Mr. Conservative," Senator Robert Taft, in the 1940s considered a moral imperative. (The stated goal of the 1948 Taft Housing Legislation was a decent home for every American family.) Few of us today are troubled by the way our economy flourishes not by providing necessities but by providing luxuries, and by the national goal of ending welfare as we know it, when a more just goal would be seeking to end poverty as we know it. We Christians mean well—feebly. We may be repelled by materialism, but we are caught up in it. We are troubled by widespread poverty, but we overly esteem wealth. In short, ours generally is a superficial religious identity, and a superficial religious identity is just that—superficial. (p. 54)

"Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker" (Prov. 14:31). But the hard question is how are the poor to be helped— by charity or by justice, by voluntary contribution or by legislation? In the book of Acts we read of the first Christian communities: "There was not a needy person among them, for as

many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them...and distribution was made to each as any had need: (Acts 2:44-45). It was all voluntary. But those were small communities, charismatic, filled with the Holy Spirit, visited regularly by one apostle or another; their people were poor and far removed from the corrupting seats of power. Should we hold them up as models for churches? Yes, by all means. Should we hold them up as a model for society at large? Alas, no.

Human nature is sinful, and therefore the virtue of the few will never compensate for the inertia of the many. Rich people and rich nations will not voluntarily open their eyes to see the biblical truth that the poor have ownership rights in their surplus. This they will see only in retrospect, after their surplus is taken away—by legislation, hopefully, not by violence. Given human goodness, voluntary contributions are possible, but given human sinfulness, legislation is indispensable. Charity, yes always; but never as a substitute for justice. What we keep forgetting in this country is that people have rights, basic rights: the right to food, the right to decent housing, the right to medical care, the right to education. Food pantries like the one we have here at Riverside, and shelters for the homeless throughout the city, are painful reminders of how the richest country in the world still denies fundamental human rights to the poorest of its citizens. (p. 55-6)

Honesty does not come painlessly: “The truth will make you free” (St. Paul), but first it makes you miserable! That God is against the status quo is one of the hardest things to believe if you are a Christian who happens to profit by the status quo. In fact, most of us don’t really believe it, not in our heart of hearts. We comfort ourselves with the thought that because our intentions are good (nobody gets up in the morning and says, “Whom can I oppress today?”), we do not have to examine the consequences of our actions. As a matter of fact, many of us are even eager to respond to injustice, as long as we can do so without having to confront the causes of it. And there’s the great pitfall of charity. Handouts to needy individuals are genuine, necessary responses to injustice, but they do not necessarily face the reason for the injustice. And that is why President Reagan and so many business leaders today are promoting charity; it is desperately needed in an economy whose prosperity is based on growing inequality. First these leaders proclaim themselves experts on matters economic, and prove it by taking the most out of the economy! Then they promote charity as if it were the work of the church, finally telling us troubled clergy to shut up and bless the economy as once we blessed the battleships. (p. 64-5)