

ECONOMICS – THE PROBLEM

THE PIZZA PROBLEM

? Who thinks they know what this is?

- When my daughters were little they would make pretend pizza and then hand out the 6 pieces, which worked fine in our family of 4.
- But what about here? After six pieces distributed there is not enough to go around. I could cut it into smaller pieces so more people get a piece but that strategy is only good to a point.
- This pizza problem illustrates a fundamental issue of economics. There are limited resources so who gets a piece and who does not? How do you allocate scarce those resources?
 - To the highest bidder? That is a free market economy.
 - Maybe resources should be redistributed so that those on the margins of society at least get something. That reflects, to a degree our economy, taxes are collected and a portion is used to fund of healthcare and welfare programs.
 - Resources could also be distributed equally so everyone get the same, regardless of their abilities and resourcefulness. That is communism's answer to economics. This morning we have Gaileen Wardern here from Cuba. She can tell about you the damage caused by that answer.
 - What if resources are controlled by an elite few, like a king or a dictator, who morsels it out as reward for loyalty?
- Each of these alternatives tries to answer the scarcity problem.

FEEDING THE 5,000

I'd like to share a story that suggests a different perspective to the economic issue. In John 6, Jesus feeds 5000 men. Give me a little grace as I take some liberty with the text and imagine what it would have been like to be a disciple experiencing the story.

We had been around Jerusalem for a number of weeks when Jesus decided to head back to Galilee. After several days of walking we arrived at Galilee. This time Jesus' status has changed and his arrival is noticed. Stories of his teaching and miracles are becoming known, even this far from Jerusalem. The result is that we have crowds of curious people who want to see and hear Jesus, the celebrity. I was tiring of the crowds and the feeling like we were constantly under the scrutiny of the public eye so when Jesus wanted to cross the lake to get away from the crowds I was ready to escape.

We found a couple of boats that were willing to take us across the lake. The crossing was uneventful. Being spring, the hillsides around the lake were verdant green with vivid swatches of purple and red from flowers. We landed and then hiked up the hillside and sat down among a vivid patch of dark purple Irises. I lay back looking up at the blue sky with a blur of purple in my periphery as a breeze gently pulsed the Irises. After the weeks with crowds around us and the tension of being watched by the religious leaders it is so nice to get away.

The sun was a little past its apex when Jesus sat up. He nudged Philip and then pointed down the hill and there was a crowd of people making their way up towards us. It was the crowd. They had found us; it's a large crowd, so much for our get away. As the crowd comes up the hill Jesus asks Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" That seems like a dumb question. Philip states the obvious, that a crowd that size would take more than 8 months wages to buy enough food. Why would Jesus ask that question? He would have as good an idea about the quantity and cost of the food as any of us. Then Andrew spoke up saying, "Here is a boy with 5 buns and 2 small fish," and realizing how ridiculously inadequate that is says, "but how far will that go among such a larger crowd."

By this time the crowd has reached us so Jesus instructs us to get the crowd sit down. The green grass and purple Irises provide a pleasant mat to sit or recline on. Jesus moves toward the boy and, kneeling down to the boy's height, he asks the boy if he will share his food with everyone. The boy shyly nods yes. Jesus places his hands on the boy's shoulders and thanks him. Then Jesus takes the buns and fish from the boy and gives thanks to God his Father for the food. After blessing the food, Jesus asks for sacks and he breaks pieces of the fish and buns into

the sacks. He gives each of us a bag to distribute the morsel of bun and fish to the crowd. We are all wondering if this is some kind of joke. What food are we to distribute? We are going to look like fools trying to give people food out of an empty bag. There is a bit of a smirk on Jesus' face but it's not the kind that would suggest that Jesus is playing a joke on us. He is serious and yet enjoying something about the moment. Each of us comes to get a bag. As I pick up a bag I am surprised by the weight. I saw Jesus put half a bun in the bag how can it weigh so much? I take the bag and go to a cluster of about 20 people and open the bag. Each of them reaches in and takes several pieces of bun. Just a minute, do the math: 20 people, at least 2 pieces each that's at least 40 pieces. But Jesus only put one piece of bun in the bag - the bag is still just as heavy now as when I first picked it up. I go to another cluster of people. The same thing happens, everyone has enough and the bag is still the same weight. I reach into the bag to feel and take a piece except I feel multiple pieces of bun. So I grab one, look at it and take a bite. It really is a piece of bread. I look back across the hillside to Jesus, he looks at me and gives me a nod of his head, the same nod he gave me at the wedding at Cana and there is still a bit of a smirk on his face.

? What was the disciples's mindset about finding food for the crowd?

? What was Jesus' mindset?

Two different economic assumptions, two very different perspectives of reality: the disciple's perspective of shortage versus Jesus' assumption of abundance: Economics 101 versus Kingdom of God economics. In Kingdom economics, the problem is not how to allocate scarce resources but how distribute abundance.

MY TENSION

This morning I will be talking about generosity. **Do you get the irony of that?** I am the church treasurer and my job is to control how and where the money goes. My training is business, management, and accounting; those are the tools that control scarce resources. Working in business I had to monitor and guard cashflow. When a proposal to spend money comes up at a River leadership meeting my gut reaction is to say no, let's save the money. I am the disciple in

the story who is having a really hard time believing kingdom economics. I pray for God's kingdom to come and then at the same time am keenly aware of scarce resources. I am caught in the tension between the power and principality of Economics versus the Kingdom of God.

Each of us has bills to pay. Perhaps we don't know how we are going to pay the bills. Each of us also prays for the kingdom of God to come in Squamish as in heaven.

? Do you feel that tension too?

So how do we respond? I'm going to propose a three part answer that starts with a look at the River's identity and purpose, then, examining causes of the tension we feel and finally what do we actually do.

RIVER IDENTITY AND PURPOSE

It might seem an odd place to start but our Identity and Purpose as a church actually has a lot to say about generosity.

SLIDE

We are a network of Simple Churches, immersed in the grace of God, listening to the Spirit, freed to live out Jesus' love.

SLIDE NETWORK OF SIMPLE CHURCHES

Starting with the first phrase, this addresses the question "who" we are. We are churches. A church is a group of people, a community. What is important to note is that by being a community we are working at the challenge of bring the kingdom of God to Squamish together, not alone, we are pooling our resources. This is one of the principles behind the Simple Churches Mustard Seed projects. Notice that the statement is plural, we are churches; churches that, together, form a network that can further pool resources of time, ideas, energy, money, and abilities so that we can do something bigger than any one of us. By being a network we can meet together in a CWG, which we could not if we unconnected. If we do a

good job of this we can create something called synergy; where instead of $1 + 1 = 2$ it actually equals 3.

SLIDE IMMERSSED IN THE GRACE OF GOD

The next part of the statement addresses how we live. We live “immersed in the grace of God”.

This has a two part meaning. The beginning of grace is the salvation work of God. Paul is emphatic when he says in Eph 2:8-9, *“For it is by grace you are saved through faith; it is not your own doing. It is God’s gift, not a reward for work done.”* Grace here is referring to Jesus’ death and resurrection that allows us to be reconciled to God. It is a gift freely given.

Continuing further, Paul then addresses the second part of grace, *“There is nothing for anyone to boast of; we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the life of good deeds which God designed us for.”* I’m reading “life of goods deeds” as a life of showing grace to others just as each of us have been shown grace by God. In Matt 10, Jesus sends out the 12 disciples to do good: drive out evil spirits and heal disease and sickness. As part of his instructions, Jesus reminds the disciples that their ability to do good is not because of them but because of what they have received: *“Freely you have received, freely give.”* And, as if to say there is more where that came from Jesus tells them to leave the credit card and the cash behind, no extra clothes, and trust that God’s grace extends beyond your limited resources.

A life of good deeds: that is massive statement, despite being five simple words. Life as in: lifetime, years, weeks, days minutes, seconds. Good, not nice, as in: mushy, without backbone, clichés, appeasing, or placating. Good as in a blend of grace and truth, like Jesus; that is how John describes Jesus, *“grace and truth came through Jesus.”* (John 1:17) Grace as gifts without strings attached that builds people up, seeks their wellbeing, and gives life. Truth that does not judge and condemn, that is what Satan does, but encourages, equips, teaches and shares God’s beautiful reality. A life of good deeds, that is a massive statement, it is too big for us; so part of our how we live is by “listening to the Spirit.” We listen personally. We also listen as a church and a network of churches. In January, we listened as a network during our week of prayer. I was only able to attend one of the evenings of prayer and what I heard was people listening to

the Spirit and praying what the Spirit was putting on their hearts. Since then I have heard some stories of good and truth that came out of those listening prayers.

SLIDE LIVE OUT LOVE

As a community of Jesus disciples, by God's grace and with the help of the Spirit, we are freed to live out Jesus' love. That is why we are here, why we exist – to live out Jesus' love. It is also what we do – live Jesus' love. Let's look at Matt 25:14-30 as a way to explore our why and what.

"It's also like a man going off on an extended trip. He called his servants together and delegated responsibilities. To one he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third one thousand, depending on their abilities. Then he left. Right off, the first servant went to work and doubled his master's investment. The second did the same. But the man with the single thousand dug a hole and carefully buried his master's money.

"After a long absence, the master of those three servants came back and settled up with them. The one given five thousand dollars showed him how he had doubled his investment. His master commended him: 'Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.'

"The servant with the two thousand showed how he also had doubled his master's investment. His master commended him: 'Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.'

"The servant given one thousand said, 'Master, I know you have high standards and hate careless ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for error. I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is, safe and sound down to the last cent.'

"The master was furious. 'That's a terrible way to live! It's criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least? The least you could have done would have been to invest the sum with the bankers, where at least I would have gotten a little interest.

“Take the thousand and give it to the one who risked the most. And get rid of this “play-it-safe” who won’t go out on a limb. Throw him out into utter darkness.’

A strong parable and I think we can learn a lot about what it means to be, “freed to live out Jesus’ love” from this parable.

- The parable talks about investments. Investments involve risk. There are unpredictable markets dynamics, weather that can cause ruin, fraud, theft, and broken promises. Seeking to live out Jesus’ love is going to involve risk. To invest love involves risk: we may get hurt, it could be messy, maybe we cause the mess, it will be unpredictable. While this is not about reckless risk taking, it is about taking risks which will likely be uncomfortable.
- There is a stewardship principle at work in the story. The servants are in, modern language, managers. They are to take care of and grow something that is not theirs. When the master returns they give everything back to him, it is his. At the last CWG Darcy talked about the Biblical idea that everything is God’s, even though we hold it. Here that principle is illustrated. How does that sit with you? It is easy to give verbal assent to the idea but I’m personally not convinced my buy-in is very deep. I tend to be protective of my stuff and digging holes to protect it instead of investing in the kingdom.
- In the story the servants are given money to invest. Jesus talks a lot about money. The significance around money is that our generosity with money tends to be an indicator of where our hearts are with God. Here is a quote that I think captures the key issue around money: “God asks for our money because he wants our hearts. God knows that if he can get us to offer our first fruits of income to him, our hearts will follow.” (Giving Your First Fruits, p11)
- In this parable money is also a metaphor.
? In addition to our money, what else do we have that we should be investing for the kingdom?
 - Time – volunteering in church and community

- The Gift of Ourselves. That might sound egotistical, what I mean by that is being present for someone. Giving your total attention to a person is an investment. That person will sense that you value them because you are paying attention to them. If someone you know is in the hospital, or house bound, or perhaps has recently experienced the death of someone close to them go and simply sit with them, be present and actually listen.
- Love. To love someone is to invest in them. With love there is no expectation of getting paid back. It is a risky investment.
- Forgiveness is writing off a debt. If someone said something that was slanderous or hurtful and they **owe** you an apology. How is writing off an investment an investment? It is caring enough about the person to tell them that what they did was wrong, forgiving them and giving them an opportunity to change.
- Abilities and skills. In the past, Darcy has organized a work crew to do home repairs for a single mom. Abilities and skills come in all kinds of forms.

EXAMINING THE TENSION

? What immobilized the third servant?

Fear of economics – scarcity, risk, passivity, insecurity.

? What is this servant's perception of his master? Harsh, demanding, dangerous and he was right. Yet, I suspect the other two servants knew the master differently. They knew the master as someone who trusted, loved and believed in them. When you think of God, do you think of him as a harsh and demanding judge or as a Father who wants the best for us, as a God who believes in us and trusts us with some serious responsibilities?

? What do you think the master would have said if the first or second servant had a business venture that went south and the money was lost?

I think the master would have said something like, "Good try. Your love and desire to serve me was greater than your fear of failure. Well done good and faithful servant." This is also a bit of

trick question. What if it is not possible for any gift and investment of goodness and love to be lost or wasted? Romans 8:28 confirms this perspective. “We know that in all things God works with those who love God for good.” (Isaak p151) Did you notice the partnership - God works with us – for good.

Earlier I talked about the tension I feel between economics and the kingdom of God. My default is to dig a hole and hide stuff in the bank account. Like the third servant, it comes from a place of fear: a fear that there is not enough to go around so I need to look after number one, forget about investing in others. It is a fear that God is not generous and that he will not come through.

SLIDE FEAR

That kind of fear based thinking erodes trust in God and blocks compassion for others. It hinders or even prevents us from living out Jesus’ love.

What do you do when you are in that place of fear, when your trust is shaky? Here are several suggestions.

SLIDE BACK TO GRACE

You go back, in an act of discipline, and immerse yourself in the grace of God. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians knew how important it was to be immersed in God’s love and grace. It is his prayer for the readers of his letter, which includes us.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge--that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen

Did you hear the language of abundance? There is not any room for fear in God's love. 1 John 4:18, echoes this point: *"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love."*

That all sounds very nice and comforting, but when you are up to your arm pits in alligators, lets talk reality, then what? You work at the spiritual practices. I'll highlight three. One of those is contemplative pray. This is not prayer for others, this is when we come, be still and allow ourselves to spend time in the Father's and Jesus', love. Henry Nouwen describes it this way: "Through contemplative prayer we keep ourselves from being pulled from one urgent issue to another and from becoming strangers to our own heart and God's heart." (P 43 In the Name of Jesus) In this place of prayer maybe we hear the Spirit, perhaps an image, a message or a silence so profound it speaks.

Another spiritual practice is community, the network of churches. There have been times when I don't feel like going to a time of prayer or simple church because I don't feel close to God. Out of discipline I force myself to go and after a while my battered heart begins to notice God's presence and I can pray again. It is why geese fly in formation; they take advantage of each other's slipstreams. In community I can take advantage of other's slipstream and get pulled alone. For many of us, our default is to withdraw and avoid the church community. That is the wrong tactic, these are the times when really need our faith community. By remaining in community we make ourselves available to experience God's love and hear him through our friendships, simple churches and CWGs.

A third practice to face fear is worship. Through worship we encounter a God who is beyond us. Encountering the transcendent shifts our myopic perspective and to see a different and larger reality. Worship can be through music and it can also take other forms. It could be reading a psalm or a walk through the forest and being caught up by beauty.

Matthew tells the story of when the disciples are crossing the lake and get caught in a storm. As they are fighting the storm Jesus comes walking on the water. They take him for a ghost. Peter calls out to the apparition that if it is really him then to tell Peter to come to him on the

water. Jesus tells Peter to come and Peter starts walking on the water looking at Jesus. Everything goes fine until Peter notices the storm and he begins to sink. Spiritual practices are a way of turning our attention from the storm back to Jesus.

SLIDE GENEROUSITY

Part of listening to the Spirit will lead us to impromptu generosity. Someone has a need and you respond out of care in the moment. If your neighbor needs groceries you buy some groceries for him or her. A friend can't afford needed car repairs; you help them out without expecting repayment. A friend asks you to look after the kids so they can take care of problem that popped up. These are real and tangible ways to live out Jesus' love and invest in heaven on earth.

SLIDE STRATEGIC GIVING

Another part, and an important part, of generosity is that it needs to be strategic. My point about strategic is that generosity often does not happen unless it is planned and intentional. The planning needs to be at personal, family and a church level. We need to be intentional in figuring out and following personal budgets and priorities. Does God get first cut or what is left over? The problem with left over is we live in a consumer culture and we are influenced by that culture. We get seduced to spend money and then there is nothing left over for financial grace. If budgeting is something you need to develop I came across a well written workbook on the subject. The Link will be in the discussion questions this week.

Church is an opportunity for strategic generosity. We collaborate and pool our financial resources to be generous through the church. Things like care funds, missions support, Community Christmas Care, and pastoral care. As a church we set budget priorities of how we show Jesus' love. By pooling our efforts we can do larger projects than we could individually.

There is another aspect of collaborating together that I have been wondering about. I have never been in a church with such a high percentage of its people self-employed. There is a lot of entrepreneurial mindset here. Can that out-of-the-box thinking and willingness to take risks

in business also be focused to create new opportunities to invest in the kingdom and show the love of Jesus to others? Are there opportunities for social enterprise, micro finance, job training or something else? Maybe this is an area to ask if the Spirit has something to say.

CONCLUSION

In John's Gospel there is a passage that is sometimes called the Priestly Prayer. It is chapter 17 and in it Jesus prays a prayer of intercession for current and future disciples. Part of Jesus' prayer recognizes this tension of being in the world and in verses 15 to 17 Jesus specifically prays, *"I do not pray you to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are strangers in the world, as I am. Consecrate them by your truth; your word is truth."* Some translations say "sanctify" instead of "consecrate", whichever word, the idea is we are to become more God like. Even though we have been reconciled to God through Jesus the work is not done in our lives and we need to become more like Jesus. That process involves being with other disciples of Jesus – in our case a network of simple churches. It requires being immersed in God's grace and listening to the Spirit. The purpose of this is so that we can live out Jesus' love. Maybe that sounds like another obligation. However, if you listen to Paul, there is something grand and majestic about it. So here is Paul with the final word:

SLIDE EPH 4:4-10

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.