

The Kingdom of Heaven – Ben Wayman

Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16

Today Jesus reminds us that there is nothing wrong with the economy. Of course, this defies almost everything we have been seeing and hearing of late: spiking gas prices, crashing financial markets, and rising unemployment. But Jesus is not in denial, nor is he delusional, nor is he an escapist who speaks of flying away to a world far, far away.

Jesus is an economist. And today he describes the economy of a larger kingdom—a kingdom he calls “the kingdom of heaven.” This kingdom, Jesus tells us, has come near. It’s not the stuff of fantasy. Actually, the kingdom of heaven is a much truer kingdom than the kingdoms of this world. And it’s *here*.

Today I would like to suggest that the kingdom of heaven is like manna. Both are unfamiliar, both are a counter-economic, and both are a challenge to receive. While they are both better than bondage, for them to be good news requires imagination and trust and surrender. In a word, receiving manna and the kingdom of heaven requires *conversion*.

The first reason why the kingdom of heaven is like manna is because it’s unfamiliar. And it’s not just a little unfamiliar—it’s pretty much everything we would never expect. Consider Israel in the wilderness.

At this point in the story, Israel has just been set free from Pharaoh and their Converse All-Stars still have mud caked on the bottom from crossing the Red Sea. Saved from slavery, Israel now finds itself in the unfamiliar land of the wilderness. Who’s in charge in the wilderness, anyway?

In this strange territory Israel has taken to the habit of complaining. Israel complains about being thirsty and reminisces on the outstanding flavor of Egyptian water. And today, Israel complains about hunger pangs and their preference for Egyptian cuisine—*fleshpots*, is how it’s put. It’s odd how the familiar is often comforting—even if it is slavery.

Hearing their complaint, the Lord provides Israel with meat in the evening and bread in the morning. As it turns out, *God* is in charge in the wilderness. But God’s bread, the fine flaky stuff, was unlike anything Israel had ever seen. It was not the kind of bread they had eaten in Egypt; the kind of bread that is laced with their own blood and sweat. But what was it?

That’s actually what *manna* means—it’s a question: “what is it?” Israel had no categories for this stuff. Its production required nothing on their part, only to gather what was needed for that day. This bread was new, it was abundant, and it was from heaven. God’s generous gift of manna required an imaginative rethinking for Israel. Life is a gift from God, not Pharaoh.

So the kingdom of heaven is like manna because it is quite unfamiliar and because it challenges our assumption that we can live without God’s generosity. Through God’s gift of manna, we find that it is God who sustains us—not ourselves, or our rulers, or our employers, or our country.

This brings us to a second reason why the kingdom of heaven is like manna—they are both what I would like to call counter-economic.

My friends in the Management Department define economics as “the study of humanity’s struggle with scarcity.” So given this definition, the economies of Egypt, Judea, and America all hold in common the struggle against limited resources, and how these resources are distributed and consumed. The Bible has a name for this kind of economic; it is called Mammon.

Mammon is the economy that is governed by scarcity. In this economy, the resources just aren’t enough. This economy “includes certain people, only buys certain things, and only lasts for a limited time” (Sam Wells). In this system, it is best to be the early bird, especially when the worms are in short supply.

But today Jesus reminds us that there is another economy. To call it a counter-economy is actually a bit misleading, because it implies that the economy of Mammon is primary. But what is helpful about understanding this alternative economy as a counter-economy is that this describes rightly its relationship to the economy of Mammon—namely, it is *completely* different.

The name for this counter-economy is, of course, Manna. In *this* economy, there is no shortage. Manna is the economy of abundance. Manna is for everybody, it gives what money can’t buy, and it only expires if you grasp for more than you need. Manna is a gift from God—and there is no scarcity in God.

So manna is the currency of the kingdom of heaven (Wells). In the parable of the landowner, we watch the economy of abundance and limitless grace come crashing into the economy of scarcity and selfish competition—Manna vs. Mammon.

It’s significant that Jesus tells this parable on the heels of his encounter with the rich young man. In this encounter Jesus makes the haunting observation about how hard it is for rich people to enter the kingdom of heaven—rich people.

By rich people Jesus means people who know they are not poor, and feel a kind of satisfaction about that. Rich people have figured out and made friends with the economy of scarcity. They have learned how to work the angles of limited resources and found a way to tip the scales into their back pockets.

But don’t be fooled—rich people are enslaved. They are locked into the economy of Mammon, but they are comfortable with it because it’s familiar and everything seems to be working well enough for them. Rich people have a taste for Egyptian water and meat . . . is it really all that bad?

The thing about rich people is that they don’t want surprises—they don’t want to have to ask questions about what it is they’re eating, or why it is that they get paid disproportionately more than other people. They don’t want to have to think about the poor, much less give everything they have to them. Rich people, in the end, don’t want things to change. If things are shaken up a

bit, they might find themselves on the short end in the economy of Mammon.

But this is exactly what Manna and the kingdom of heaven do—they invert everything. The last are first and the first are last. It's a revolution.

So a landowner goes out and hires some workers for a day's worth of labor. The landowner hires five shifts of workers, ranging from those who begin with the rising of the sun to those who haven't even worked up a sweat before the work day ends. And then, the landowner has his manager pay the workers, **in reverse order**, so that the early morning workers can see what the late afternoon newbies get paid—a daily wage. It's enough for them to feed their family that day—nothing more and nothing less.

And what did the early morning workers get?: *Manna*. And they complained because manna is **not** the currency of the kingdom of Caesar.

My colleague, Jack Chism, tells me that this is what is called a “perverse incentive.” When the pay-off for hard work is taken away, productivity falls off and people stop working. It ruins business.

I wonder what would happen if Greenville College started pulling stunts like this. What if all students qualified for the same housing?—freshmen awarded upper-division and off-campus housing, while seniors are stuck sweating out their final year on 4th Joy? Or what if all college employees got paid the same, regardless of position, tenure, credentials, work, hours and experience? I wonder how the Christians at the college would respond.

If, in the kingdom of heaven, the first are last and the last are first, then why would any self-respecting, industrious and capable worker ever want to live in that kingdom? Doesn't Jesus see the risks of operating kingdom business in this way? What kind of people does God want in the kingdom of heaven anyway?

The fundamental challenge we face in receiving the kingdom of heaven and its manna is that we have a hard time believing it's true. Sure, we're greedy and envious and have a penchant for squashing our competition. But the real challenge is that we have a hard time seeing how any other kind of kingdom could be true.

Abundance and the kingdom of heaven sounds great, but what about all the famine and foreclosures, the disease and death that surround us? Where is God and all the abundance? Often, the kingdom of heaven seems to be a mere fantasy—merely wishful thinking. If it is true, we tell ourselves, it's certainly not true *here or now*.

That is why John the Baptist and Jesus both preface their announcements that the kingdom of heaven is near with the imperative: REPENT. I used to think that this call to repent meant only that we were to confess our sins, be forgiven, and stop sinning. But I think there's something more going on here.

The Hebrew word for repent is “Teshuva.” Teshuva means to all of a sudden turn on a dime. So when the prophets called Israel to “Teshuva,” they were inviting Israel to turn back to God ... and to all of a sudden see a new world. It’s a call to conversion.

The reason why repentance is essential to enter the kingdom of heaven is because without it, *we will not want it*. Receiving and eating manna requires our conversion. We need to turn and see the world as God’s creation, full of abundance and sustained by God’s life. The secret to life in the kingdom of heaven is “learning to love the things God gives us in plenty.” (Wells)

We are here today because we need to be reminded that we belong to a kingdom immeasurably larger than the kingdoms of this world. We need to hear the words: the kingdom of heaven has come near. But for this to be good news we must turn away from the kingdoms of this world and their small economies. This conversion requires a whole community of people who are committed to learning together how to live in an economy where everyone is included and there is more than enough to go around—forever. This same community is the one that gathers regularly to receive bread from heaven, which is nothing less than God’s very Self—abundance.