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God's Kingdom Economy of Love

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How could a parish participate in a local economy in a way that reflects our values as Episcopalians: things like inclusiveness, generosity, kindness, respect, connection to our community, and sustainable and environmentally conscience practices of production and energy use?

This is the question posed to us by our former bishop several years ago. It is an intriguing question and a challenging one. The intention behind it was to wonder how we as a Church can meet our neighbors where they are without proselytizing and letting them see us practicing what we believe beyond charity work. This made it particularly challenging because as a church we are more used to taking the charity approach of asking what our community needs and then using our resources to provide that need as best we can. By seeking to engage in a local economy – that is, a system of interaction and exchange - we needed a broader perspective and the courage to “move out of our lane of experience”, so to speak.

To participate in this question, as many of you know, we started a new kind of ministry. It looks like a coffee shop, but it isn't like any corporate franchise we are all familiar with. We call it CrossRoads Café because it operates at our location which happens to be the literal crossroads of University Terrace and Park Place and because it is also a crossroads of the secular and sacred. While the shrewd practice of purchasing everything from cars, houses, education, clothing, food, blue books, to coffee on debt is convenient and the socially accepted practice, one of our values is generosity, which is contrary to debt. So, we have a pay-it-forward model of operations at CrossRoads. It works like this: at CrossRoads Café your drink has already been purchased. If you like, you can purchase a coffee or tea drink of your choice, but technically, it is a donation for the next person who orders the same thing. This is why if someone doesn't have the cash to pay for a drink, it is no big deal. People can also contribute volunteer work for a cup of coffee or tea. So far this semester, one person has taken us up on that and done some weeding.

I never tire of watching people try to figure out our pay-it-forward system. It is pretty simple, but because it so contrary to the way corporate business operates, it can feel confusing. To understand pay it forward, all you have to do is adjust your thinking from debt based to generosity based. And that change in thinking is what is difficult, not getting a cup of coffee or tea at CrossRoads Café. I've seen people respond to that invitation to think differently with resistance. Some offer to leave their contact information when they didn't have cash. I've seen others return

moments later with money. And then, there are the folks who I watch figure it out and it is like watching a heavy weight fall from their shoulders. They stand a little taller. They smile, and yes, I see that smile even behind a face mask. They relax. These folks return for coffee or tea on other days, and they give. They give much more than the \$2 suggested donation price on the sign because they are grateful to be our respected neighbors, and not treated like consumers.

Sometimes well-meaning folks suggest we get an electronic system so people can use their cards, but I have yet to discover one that doesn't depend on the debt system of hidden charges or percentages taken by companies who are not involved in the direct line of coffee farmer to coffee roaster to us to our neighbor that is one of values. These folks mean well. They want to improve what we have and want CrossRoads to succeed. But it misses the point. We aren't trying to be the next corporate giant. We are trying to be the church in the world in a way that looks like Jesus, without being of the world. It can be a struggle to understand.

Just like a lot of folks struggle to understand the parable Jesus told in today's Gospel. When we look at the parable through the commonly accepted practices many corporations engage in that put profit above the wellbeing of people and see customers as disconnected consumers instead of neighbors, this parable is difficult to understand. Because it looks like Jesus is praising values of shrewdness or cleverness. But when we look beyond the parable to the part of the Gospel where Jesus was talking about practicing generosity and faithfulness with what has been given, we might start to realize what Jesus was getting at.

This parable is more of a description of the way things are, that when pushed people can be clever with what they have to get themselves out of trouble. Jesus' comments after the parable appear to be asking what if people thought differently and used the abilities of intelligence, creativity, and adaptability to practice the values that exemplify God's love in the world -- values of inclusion, generosity, respect, connection to community, sustainable and environmentally conscience production and use?

Sound familiar? We could say today's Gospel is a lot like the question Bishop Breidenthal asked several years ago. As we've experienced, once you can let go of trying to understand the question through corporate practices based on greed, it changes or transforms into a life-giving question. To participate with us in this question, Bishop Breidenthal gave us money he had been given to start our coffee shop without taking on debt. He paid it forward, and never asked for money back or for a return on his investment. Instead, he delighted in the reports I gave on how we were doing and when he had insight as to how to handle challenges, he shared them. Always, he was a supportive presence. Over the years I've worked with a few

student groups at Ohio University in the school of business who were assigned projects to help us with CrossRoads Café. At first, I thought they were supposed to help us figure out some of our challenges, but then I realized they were assigned projects for what they could learn from us. It was another way to participate in the question and let them experience how we were doing something different that makes a difference, something good, something rare that their professor wanted them exposed to. That's when I realized it was our turn to pay it forward by sharing our time and story of how we are practicing what we believe. The professor tells me how the students who work with me on their projects have positive experiences, and in some cases, learned more than he hoped.

Ultimately, the question, whether it's expressed the way Jesus asked it or how the bishop asked, is how we engage in God's Kingdom economy of love while living in a world that relies on a debt economy that sees consumers instead of neighbors, scarcity instead of generosity, power instead of inclusion, where greed is good, and love is not. As we are learning, it isn't easy because people are far more likely to experience greed and scarcity than of the love of God. Which means our little coffee shop ministry isn't so little because it is a glimpse at something different, something life-giving. It proves there is another way to be as people, as community, as individuals, yes, even as a business, that does not rely on debt or greed. It can be liberating to learn we don't have to be limited to or constrained by systems of debt or greed.

Which is why today's Gospel is so important. It reminds us being followers of Jesus means practicing what we believe even when someone else might not understand. When someone doesn't understand, or when we struggle, it might be because we've been too deeply embedded in a system that is not based on God's Kingdom economy of love. When we can step out of that system and invite others to consider the perspective of God's kingdom economy of love then we can stop using so much time criticizing the faults in the current systems and begin creating institutions, businesses, even a politic based on generosity, respect, inclusion, kindness, connections to community, sustainable and environmentally conscience production and care. The Gospel practiced in real life. Through Christ, it is possible. We've seen a tiny bit of it right here.