

## Tuesday - No Silos

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Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert, for forty days being put to the test by the devil. During that time he ate nothing and at the end he was hungry. Then the devil said to him, "If you are Son of God, tell this stone to turn into a loaf." But Jesus replied, "Scripture says,

*Human beings live not on bread alone.*

Jesus started his public ministry with a vision quest that emphasized the continuity between his project and the great story of the Exodus: 40 days in the desert, reminding the readers of the scripture accounts of the 40 years the Israelites spent in the wilderness leaving Egypt. Furthermore, he fasts for these same 40 days, bringing to mind Moses' forty-day fast recounted in Deuteronomy 9:18. There is no human witness to these events other than Jesus, whom we must assume was the original reporter. It follows, therefore, that these descriptions of times and events, and the others which we will explore, were chosen by Jesus for their symbolic value. Jesus wants us to make the sort of connections we will explore. It is the point of the episode.

After 40 years of wandering, the Israelites came out of the desert and into: Canaan - a vassal state of Egypt. Yahweh liberated them from the power of Pharaoh, led them on a 40-year spiritual purification trek, and delivered them across the Jordan - through the back door, as it were - into Canaan, a nation-state that paid tribute to Egypt and was part of the Egyptian empire. They were back in Egypt!

Yahweh's point, it seems, was not to help the Israelites escape bodily from Egypt, but to liberate them by teaching them how to be non-Egyptian in Egypt. This is still God's project today: to teach us how to lead a Kingdom life in a non-Kingdom world.

Jesus has set a most dramatic stage for his report of his experience in the desert. He did not just get sprinkled, leave the baptismal font and go to a retreat center, even though that would have made an individual story of great interest and even drama. He came up out of the River Jordan and at once went straight into the desert. Jesus is claiming his place in the Big Story. Jesus is saying that what happened next and what continues to happen through the gospel stories is nothing less than a continuation of the one Cosmic Story of the relationship between God and creation. His "vision quest" in the desert is not merely individual, but profoundly corporate.

This vision quest is both a time for solidifying Jesus' commitment to his project and a time of great vulnerability, when the magnitude of the task and its awful cost might dissuade him. The devil - the Adversary - the tester - chooses

this opportune moment to attempt to derail the whole deal. He will test Jesus' understanding of and commitment to the coming Reign of God. The three tests attack the three "pillar principles" on which the Reign of God rests - if these can be subverted, Jesus' work will be useless and the threat to the devil's domain will be averted. Furthermore, the tests are subtle: Jesus is not urged to turn to evil, but to accept a lesser vision: to substitute the good for the gospel, which is always the most dangerous of substitutions.

The first test, therefore, is of the utmost relevance to the inhabitants of this poor, rocky, occupied land: If you are Son of God, tell this stone to turn into a loaf of bread. Rocks are plentiful in the Holy Land, and bread is hard to come by. One who could routinely turn stones into bread would be rich and influential, indeed!

Jesus responds by quoting Scripture: Human beings live not on bread alone. He is quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, which is itself a passage recalling the Exodus experience. Verses 2 and 3 read as follows:

Remember the long road by which Yahweh your God led you for forty years in the desert, to humble you, to test you and know your inmost heart - whether you would keep his commandments or not. He humbled you, he made you feel hunger, he fed you with manna which neither you nor your ancestors had ever known, to make you understand that human beings live not on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of Yahweh.

The manna experience is the key to understanding how it is that human beings live not on bread alone, and hence the key to understanding Jesus' response to this first temptation - and to understanding the temptation itself. This is recounted in Exodus Chapter 16.

Yahweh said to Moses, Look, I shall rain down bread for you from the heavens. Moses told the people, Yahweh commands that each of you must collect as much as he needs to eat: one homer per head for each person in his tent. The Israelites collected it; some more, some less. When they measured out what they had collected, no one who had collected more had too much; no one who had collected less had too little. Each had collected as much as he needed to eat.

Moses then said, No one may keep any of it for tomorrow. But some of them did not listen and tried to save for the next day: it bred maggots and smelt foul. So they could not save it, but it fell day by day, and they gathered and were full. When the full sun rose, whatever they had not collected melted away.

On the sixth day, Moses told the people to collect twice as much as usual, and to boil whatever was left at day's end - for Yahweh wanted the seventh day to be a Sabbath, a day of complete rest. So they did, and what they collected extra on the sixth day and boiled did not spoil or smell bad on the seventh day.

Moses then told the people to save an homer of the manna to show to their descendants, so that they could see the bread on which Yahweh fed the Israelites

when he brought them out of Egypt. Aaron did this and put it in the Ark along with the tablets of the Law. We all remember that the Ark held the tablets of the Law - we often forget that it also held a jarful of manna, equally symbolic of Yahweh's presence and covenant relationship with the chosen people.

What are we to make of this story of divine provender in the wilderness? As a child I accepted it as literal truth, meaning just what it said. As I grew older and more sophisticated, I came to understand this and many Bible stories in more sophisticated, more complex ways. I looked for scientific explanations of what manna really was (there are many), or anthropological descriptions of how an early story might have gotten changed and distorted during the many generations during which it was transmitted as an oral tradition. I wanted to be in control of the story, to set boundaries on what it might mean and what its significance to me might be. I wanted to explain it away, so it would not have power over me.

Now I have come nearly full circle, and hear these old stories with much of the awe and wonder that they elicited from me as a child. As my teacher Richard Rohr says, "All stories are true, and some of them really happened." Biblical archeology is providing more and more evidence that many of the Bible stories, including the Exodus, really happened. What is clear to me in my heart of hearts is that these stories are profoundly true. They would not otherwise have been preserved at such great personal effort from generation to generation, first by oral story-tellers and later by scribes. They would not otherwise ring so true in my heart whenever I hear them.

How Yahweh fed the Israelites in the wilderness is not a scientific question that I care about. That Yahweh fed them, and that the Israelites experienced that feeding as described, and that as they told and re-told the story the Truth emerged as we receive the story today, seems to me self-evident. All stories are true, and some of them really happened.

Manna is a symbol of and example of an economy of grace. Everybody gets enough manna, by the grace of God. It cannot be hoarded or stored; no matter how much you gather, there is always just enough. God provides because God loves us, not because God owes us or we have earned it.

The point of manna is to rely on God rather than our own efforts to provide our needs. We evoke the manna experience every time we pray to God to "give us this day our daily bread", but that doesn't seem to stop us from accumulating our 401(k) plans, our savings for a "rainy day", or our precious metal jewelry "as a hedge against inflation." The Israelites couldn't save up manna for a "rainy day", they had to rely on God to provide every day. The devil wanted Jesus to intervene by his own hands to make bread, but Jesus refused to stop relying on God to provide what he really needed.

Jesus returned to this theme again and again throughout his ministry. Perhaps the most dramatic example is the parable in Luke 12:

Then he told them a parable, "There was once a rich man who, having had a

good harvest from his land, thought to himself, 'What am I to do? I have not enough room to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones, and store all my grain and my goods in them, and I will say to my soul: My soul, you have plenty of good things laid by you for many years to come; take things easy, eat, drink, have a good time.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This very night the demand will be made for your soul; and this hoard of yours, whose will it be then?' So it is when someone stores up treasure for himself instead of becoming rich in the sight of God."

This is the first principle of the Reign of God - the first rule of the road for learning how to be non-Egyptian in the land of Egypt: no silos.

The Israelites listening to Jesus had a rich if painful shared experience which served as the context for hearing Jesus teach about not building silos: their ancestors, by forced labor imposed on them without mercy, had built not just the silos, but the "store-cities" of Pithom and Rameses for Pharaoh.

Jesus has set the vision of the Economy of God over against the Economy of Empire in the starkest of terms. On the one hand there is the model of Egypt, which under the guidance of Joseph carried out the Economy of Empire to a state of near perfection. Under the guise of helping the people survive a famine,

Joseph acquired all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh, since one by one the Egyptians sold their fields, so hard pressed were they by the famine; and the whole country passed into Pharaoh's possession, while the people he reduced to serfdom from one end of Egypt to the other. The only land he did not acquire belonged to the priests, for the priests received an allowance from Pharaoh and lived on the allowance that Pharaoh gave them. Hence they had no need to sell their land.

Joseph, as Pharaoh's agent, became the sole landlord and the only source of seed grain in the nation. The former landowners became tenant sharecroppers, and Pharaoh became fabulously wealthy - so wealthy that Joseph's kinfolk were reduced to slavery building silos and silo-cities to store Pharaoh's wealth. Egypt was not unique or even unusual in doing this: the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans all did it - even the Israelites gathered in wealth from the ends of their little empire during the days of the monarchy, and accumulated it in the center of power. Think of the description of the Temple and where the materials came from to build it. Think of the ways our own United States empire gathers material wealth from the ends of the earth and accumulates it here for our own benefit. This economy of empire accumulates wealth for some and debt for the many. In the present day, we even call the nations of the world either creditor nations or debtor nations. We might call this an economy of debt.

After the parable of the silos, Jesus immediately describes a starkly different economy - one we might call an economy of grace.

Then he said to his disciples, "That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, not about your body and how you are to clothe it. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Think of

the ravens. They do not sow or reap; they have no storehouses and no barns; yet God feeds them. And how much more you are worth than the birds! Can any of you, however much you worry, add a single cubit to your span of life? If a very small thing is beyond your powers, why worry about the rest? Think how the flowers grow; they never have to spin or weave; yet, I assure you, not even Solomon in all his royal robes was clothed like one of them. Now if that is how God clothes a flower which is growing wild today and is thrown into the furnace tomorrow, how much more will he look after you, who have so little faith! But you must not set your hearts on things to eat and things to drink; nor must you worry. It is the gentiles of this world who set their hearts on all these things. Your Father well knows you need them. No; set your hearts on his kingdom, and these other things will be given you as well."

"There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the Kingdom."

The raven and the wildflower are set before us as examples of how we ought to act and feel about our needs for daily bread and adequate clothing. Rather than build bigger silos, we should be trusting that Yahweh will provide each day the food we need for that day, so that we have no need to store any for tomorrow, and that Yahweh will provide excellent clothing for us to wear, without any need for us to worry about providing it for ourselves. Each day Yahweh will provide the food we need for that day? Sound familiar? Jesus is not setting forth an unattainable ideal, or some spiritualized head trip, telling us to act "as if". Jesus is calling up the central story of the faith: that Yahweh did indeed intervene in history on behalf of the Israelites, and in fact provided them with manna in the wilderness that each day turned out to be just enough to meet their needs.

In feeding the people with manna, Yahweh is demonstrating two important truths: God is the source of all good things, not we human beings; and the purpose of economic organization is to see that everyone has enough, not to maximize wealth - either in the aggregate or in the individual case. Each of us has food to eat and clothes to wear because Yahweh caused the rain to fall and the earth to be fruitful; to claim the fruits of the earth for our own and to charge others exorbitantly for them is contrary to God's will.

In case the Israelites - or you and I - were to think that this "everyone has enough, no one has too much" economic model were only applicable to the Exodus experience itself, Yahweh institutes a permanent Sabbath structure to the economy that begins in Exodus and is elaborated in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. The Israelites were instructed during their journey through the desert to make every seventh day "a day of complete rest, a Sabbath sacred to Yahweh." Later in Exodus this is made a permanent sign of the bond between Yahweh and the Israelites, and in Leviticus it is expanded to include a sabbatical year and every 49 years a jubilee year, including the forgiveness of debts, the return of ancestral land that had been sold, and freeing slaves and indentured servants.

There is a seemingly inevitable tendency, in any economic system, for wealth to become unequally distributed: some people/families grow more and more

wealthy, and some people/families fall deeper and deeper into poverty. This seems to be true in every economic system: capitalist, socialist, communist, or whatever. The Jubilee year imposed by Yahweh does not value any particular economic system over another, nor does it discriminate between wealth justly accumulated or unjustly accumulated. Every 49 years, says Yahweh, the debts of the poorest are to be forgiven, and their fundamental means of livelihood - their land - is to be returned to them. The wealthy will not necessarily be recompensed for their loss; the poor will be liberated from the burden of their poverty.

Now the Jubilee is an example of the Economy of Grace. Only by grace can we wealthy folks realize that Yahweh is far more reliable than our silos and storehouses to provide for our needs; only by grace can we bear to release our hard-won wealth without compensation - even though it clouds our vision and distances us from a close relationship with God. Only by grace can the poor receive the Jubilee distribution, because they are certainly powerless to win it for themselves: that is the definition of poor - those without power, possessions, and prestige.

What we have all around us today is an Economy of Debt. In the economy of debt people get things because they can pay for them, or promise to pay for them in the future (i.e., go into debt). The economy of debt acts to create more and more economic stratification and hierarchy, so that "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." Even programs that purport to serve the interest of the whole community in the face of impending disaster, like Joseph's food policy in Egypt, create ever-greater accumulations of wealth and deserts of grinding poverty. All this is explained away by saying the rich deserve their riches and the poor have earned their poverty: a theology of prosperity, a theory of social Darwinism, a culture of the Protestant Ethic.

So in the economy of debt folks get what they deserve, and the language of the economy of debt reflects this. "Act deservingly, and you will be rewarded." (For you English students, that is the imperative first, then the indicative.) "Do this, then these other things will happen." A great example of the language of the economy of debt is the current Pepsi advertising campaign:

"Buy Pepsi. Get Stuff." Also: "Dial 1-800-COLLECT. Save 44%!"

In the economy of grace people get what they need because it is God's good pleasure to give it to them. There are no silos in the economy of grace because God is faithful and the people place their trust in God. The language of the economy of grace is just the reverse of the economy of debt: "This is how grace is at work in the world, so act accordingly." It has pleased your Father to give you the Kingdom, so there is no need to be afraid.

Now before you start discounting the economy of grace as pie-in-the-sky idealism, realize that there are numerous examples of this economy in our everyday lives. The home is the most common and one of the best illustrations. We operate our homes as an economy of grace: we feed and clothe our children out of our love for them, not because they can pay for their room and board. From

our sons' and daughters' perspective, the kitchen is a magic cupboard, providing enough to satisfy their hunger every day: they don't have to build a food pantry in their bedroom to store up against some future famine. When Jesus tells us that we must become like little children in order to enter the Kingdom of God, or participate in the Reign of God, he is saying in part that we must trust God's economy of grace to provide for us as children trust their parent's economy of grace to provide for them.

Another example of the economy of grace is the experience of the early church in the period immediately following the resurrection of Christ. Luke reports in the Acts of the Apostles that

all who shared the faith owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and distributed the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed. Each day, with one heart, they regularly went to the Temple but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; ....

The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, as everything they owned was held in common. ... None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from the sale of them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any who might be in need.

Two present-day examples of the economy of grace are the many monastic communities all over the world and the Catholic Worker movement, which has its roots here in the United States. When we were first planning how to bring Norfolk Quaker House from dream to reality, Steve Baggaly of the Norfolk Catholic Worker House reminded us that we did not have to be incorporated, or gain tax-exempt status from the IRS, or accept grants from foundations. We could be like Catholic Worker. "How do you get what you need?" we asked. "We beg," replied Steve.

"We beg." How simple, and how powerful a statement of faith. They depend on the economy of grace to supply their needs: and that small community of five or six people, including a very young child, not only have all they need but are able to provide hospitality to several people at a time and to serve breakfast to 100-125 homeless men, women, and children four mornings a week. They have a roof over their heads, clothes for themselves and to give away to those in need, and money to buy medicine for the poor and even to support the work of Norfolk Quaker House. "There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the Kingdom."

The economy of debt is very powerful, and is in fact trying to overwrite the economy of grace wherever it finds it. One of the most powerful tools it has for this effort is spiritualization: reinterpreting the teachings of Jesus and the rest of the Story to understand richness and poverty as a state of mind, rather than a physical reality. Now there is such a thing as spiritual poverty - but most of Jesus' teachings have to do with physical poverty and physical wealth - how one offends

God and the other distances us from God.

When as a child I was taught the Lord's prayer, the radical nature of the petition that God would give us this day the bread we need this day was not clear to me or my teachers. The other great petition was completely spiritualized: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who have trespassed against us." Matthew puts it bluntly and plainly:

And forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven those who are in debt to us.

Our participation in the Jubilee is directly linked to how well we allow others to participate - if we give up the accumulation of wealth, and depend solely on Yahweh to provide, there will be enough for everyone. If there is only two fish and five loaves of bread for five thousand people, everyone will have enough and no one will have too much.

"Human beings live not on bread alone." With these seven words Jesus invokes a pillar principle of the Reign of God, evoking the deepest cultural memory of all of us who trace our religious heritage back to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. If you want to be part of Yahweh's economy of grace, Jesus says, "No Silos."