

Generosity: The Gift Economy

Or We Are Enough?©

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STORY FOR ALL AGES

The Loaves and Fish: a story from the gospel of Mark 6:32

Jesus and his crew (his disciples, his helpers and his assistants) had been working hard and teaching many people. So many people were coming and going that they had not had proper time to rest or even to eat. So Jesus said to them come with me, let's get away for awhile and chill. Yes, Jesus really did say chill, can you believe that?

Anyway, somehow people saw them leaving and figured out where they were headed. It was as if everyone was on the same Twitter feed because somehow. More and more people kept showing up at the remote coastal area to which they had retreated. Many of them had even gotten to this remote area before Jesus and his gang.

When Jesus saw all the people, he knew that they had come to honor and feed their spiritual hunger. He knew that the people sensed that there was more to living than is often talked about in everyday life. He knew that they longed to taste and experience this moreness, this life in abundance. And he also knew that words alone, no matter how beautiful or memorable, are not enough.

So when his disciples, his crew, came to him and said, "It's getting late, this is a remote place, the people are hungry. We should send them away now before it gets dark." Jesus said, "You go out and feed them all."

Then they said to him almost in unison, "We can't do that! We don't have the resources to feed all these people!" Jesus smiled and said, "Take inventory of what you have. Get some baskets, move among the people, and ask them to put what they have in the baskets." The apostles, the disciples and the helpers, did this. They moved among the people and gathered up five loaves and two fish.

Some, but not all the Unitarians among them (being very good at mathematics and reason) knew that this wasn't enough to feed the multitude. They looked at the numbers and said, "It's not going to work, we don't have enough." Jesus blessed the bread and fish, gave thanks for the initial generosity, gave thanks for those who trusted enough to share, and said, "Take these baskets of bread and fish and begin to share them amongst the groupings in the crowd."

And even though the apostles, the disciples and the crew were not sure that this was going to work, Jesus wanted them to trust themselves; to know that who they were, was good enough. And wouldn't you know it, as the disciples began to move through the groups of people, passing the baskets with food, more and more people added food to the baskets as they went around. And sure enough there was plenty for all to eat.

I love this story for so many reasons. It reminds me that even though I find myself thinking that I'm not good enough, or don't have enough resources, the spiritual truth is that I am enough, that WE are enough. We have the resources we need to care for each other, to feed each other, to support each other, to learn with each other, and to make our world more just.

I also love this story because it reminds me to celebrate how special the first few brave people were who put their food in the baskets, the lead givers, so to speak. To me this is the miracle. This teacher of theirs, this rabbi Jesus, inspired them to let go of a small sure thing and participate in something greater. They put their food in the baskets not knowing for sure, that they would actually get anything to eat.

So then, when the disciples started sending the baskets around, and people started taking food out, other people saw this and started putting the food that they had been holding on to in the baskets as they passed. And do you know what happened next? At the end of passing the baskets not only did everyone get fed, they had more food than when they started.

This my friends, is what church is all about, and this is the true communion, this is the miracle of the loaves and fish

READING

Excerpt from *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Kimmerer, R.W, adapted

I dreamed not long ago of a small farmers market with all its vivid textures. I walked through the stalls with a basket over my arm as always and went right to Flo for a bunch of fresh cilantro. We chatted and laughed and when I held out my coins she waved them off, patting

my arm and sending me away. “A gift”, she said. “Muchas gracias, senora”, I replied. There was my favorite bread, with clean clothes laid over the round loaves. I chose a few rolls, opened my purse, and this vendor too gestured away my money as if I were impolite to suggest paying. I looked around in bewilderment; this was my family market and yet everything had changed. It wasn’t just for me - no shopper was paying. I floated through the market with a sense of euphoria. Gratitude was the only currency accepted here. It was all a gift. It was like picking wild strawberries in the woods; the merchants were just intermediaries passing on the gifts from the earth.

I looked in my basket: two zucchinis, an onion, apples, bread, and a bunch of cilantro. It was still half empty, but it felt full. I had everything I needed. I glanced over at the cheese stall, thinking to get some, but knowing it would be given, not sold, I decided that I could do without. It’s funny: Had all the things in the market merely been a very low price, I probably would have scooped up as much as I could. But when everything became a gift, I felt self restraint. I didn’t want to take too much. And I began thinking of what small presents I might bring to the vendors tomorrow.

HOMILY

I love this dream from the book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. I think it is very important to let the subtleties and the wonder of the gift economy grow in our souls.

The author opened my eyes and heart when she explained something that I had heard as a kid: “Indian giver”. It was a phrase used to make fun of or demean indigenous culture.

The term derives from a cross-cultural misinterpretation between indigenous people operating on a gift economy and a colonial culture predicated on the concept of private property. When gifts were given to the settlers by the Native inhabitants, the settlers understood that they were valuable and were intended to be retained: giving them away would have been an affront. But the indigenous people understood the value of the gift to be based in reciprocity and would have been affronted if the gifts did not circulate back to them. Many ancient indigenous teachings counsel that whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again.

From the viewpoint of a private property economy, the gift is deemed to be free because we obtain it free of charge, at no cost. But in the gift economy, gifts are not free. The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity. In Western thinking, private land is understood to be a bundle of rights, whereas in a gift economy, property has a bundle of responsibilities attached. And relationships

In the gift economy it is not just the food that is nourishing, it is the relationship. And that is the case with us here today. It wasn't just the bread and the fish that nourished the people. It was the trust they had in the process and the wealth and well being that comes from maintaining and growing the common good. It is not just the bread and apples and juice that will nourish us today, it is the joy that comes from being together and the understanding that we are more together than we could ever be as separate individuals. Today, we celebrate the spiritual importance of gratitude and gift.

We can be a very self-centered and even greedy people. We are also very good at getting our needs met and that can often translate into feelings of entitlement. And thoughts like, "I deserve ..." (fill in the blank). This past year, we even unfortunately and dangerously see members of our federal government saying that just being a human being does not entitle you to clean air, clean water, shelter and a relief from hunger. This is wrong and it is important that we challenge these ungenerous thoughts in ourselves and in our elected representatives.

When we shift those thoughts of entitlement to feelings of gratitude, we are able to realize that all we have been blessed with are really gifts. We don't own the earth even though some of think we do. We don't own the air or the water. And when we move into gratitude and appreciation we help to keep our egos in check. When we buy a pair of socks we have simply a new pair of socks and a little less money. When a friend or relative knits us a pair of socks or a scarf, and gives it to us, we have much more than a pair of socks or a scarf. We have a relationship.

Participating in the gift economy calls us to deepen our appreciation of our lives and, I hope, increases our sense of generosity.

Reference

Kimmerer, R.W. (2013). Braiding sweetgrass: indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teaching of plants. Minneapolis, MN. Milkweek Editions.