

MAYFLOWER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
3901 NORTHWEST 63RD STREET
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73116
DR. ROBIN R. MEYERS, SENIOR MINISTER
REV. CHRIS MOORE, MINISTER, NORMAN UCC
405-842-8897
cyasunday@mayflowerucc.org
www.mayflowerucc.org
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Mayflower 10/18/09
Deuteronomy 15:1-18
Radio 10/25/09

“A Celebration of Community”

This summer I went with the Mayflower Medical Mission to Nicaragua for a trip that had to wait through seminary and the first few months of dedicated work on a new church in Norman. It was a challenging and rewarding visit and I learned a great deal. It was a unique opportunity to be there with Mark Falk and Jim Saunders and Robin almost 10 years after they had visited Nicaragua seeking to start such a project. One of the reasons that we have such a presence in the mountain town of Jinotega is that is where they saw the most immediate need on that visit 10 years ago...well that and after having setup and torn down equipment several times before arriving, they decided they were tired of doing it and Jinotega was as good a place as any.

The clinic and school are doing well and the town of Jinotega has even picked up in the past decade. The economy is generally better, as are the living conditions for some. You may not be aware of this, but once the clinic was established and grew enough funding to seek a resident doctor, the mission paid the doctor's salary for the first couple of years. The Nicaraguan government pays it now and is actually seeking to replicate the success of the clinic's work and structure elsewhere in the country.

Those are all the surface stories. What is not so apparent is the larger narrative going on at a global level. In 2004, Nicaragua was the recipient of a massive debt cancellation program through the IMF and the World Bank in which approximately \$200 million dollars was simply wiped off the books. This money was a millstone around Nicaragua's neck and amounted to over 1/3 of the GDP. The elimination of that debt - mostly interest payments as the principle had been paid many times over - allowed Nicaragua to begin to

provide things like health care, infrastructure (including a brand new road to Jinotega), water resources and other social services.

Since 1999, Jubilee USA has been advocating for debt cancellation throughout the developing world. They do this because they know that debt relief works. The impact of the latest round of debt cancellation approved by the G-8 in 2005 and implemented by the IMF and World Bank in 2006, means that 21 countries in Africa and Latin America have seen full debt cancellation... almost \$40 billion dollars.

- In Ghana, the money saved is being used for infrastructure, education and health care
- In Mozambique, savings have been used to build 746 schools and provide safe drinking water to over one million additional people
- In Burundi, elimination of school fees allows an additional 300,000 children to be educated
- In Honduras, fees have been eliminated for primary education

This effort is based on scripture and the spiritual quest for equality and justice. It comes straight from this idea of a sabbatical year – the Jubilee that is spelled out in Deuteronomy, Leviticus and Exodus and is then referred to by almost all of the prophets, including one that we call Jesus the Christ.

We are facing a spiritual crisis today where people are overworked, stressed out and chronically neglecting family, friends and their own spiritual growth in the name of either “feeding the machine” or “keeping up with the Joneses.” And contrary to what the commercials will tell you, our rabid consumption has not led us any closer to wholeness. Yet we still live under the thumb of a system that tells us that we are acting responsibly by consuming more and that people who have three jobs are just hard workers, not oppressed pawns in a game which can’t be won.

We are working our way through an economic calamity which shows that we haven’t really evolved much since this ancient wisdom was passed down. While we may hope for a world of abundance, self-restraint and mutual care, we create a world of competition, unchecked greed, scarcity, overwork and extreme economic inequalities.

Whether we are talking about environmental, social or economic conditions, there comes a time, almost invariably, when we realize our short-sightedness and understand that perhaps there is some merit to God’s way of doing things. And this is usually in 20/20 vision because it always occurs in hindsight. This is what prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah shout to Israel – what are you doing, O Israel? Why do you turn from God’s path and trust only your

own limited vision? The prophets decry more than a lack of social justice; they decry a lack of faith and an absence of vision.

The truth is we can't exactly give ourselves a great score on the insight scale. We can go back even in very short term history and see how decisions that seemed pretty wise at the time have turned out completely the opposite. We can view with that same hindsight very clear mistakes and historians love to write books about what should have been done, from the perspective of decades of gained wisdom. Perhaps this kind of awareness of the limited capacity of our decision making should bring us to some sense of humility, but lessons in humility seem pretty lost on us these days.

So we end up with the "best laid plans of mice and men" scenario over and over. As our plans come to fruition and prove either too selfish or not developed enough or simply too narrow minded, we leave gaps. And in those gaps are real human beings placed there either by a combination of choices and circumstances, by generational situations or by the blind fate of birth. It is that suffering that calls for a faithful response. And guess what? We need look no farther than our own scripture for a hard but clear answer to poverty, famine and the despair caused by them.

What you heard read this morning was the Torah - the law as it stood in ancient Israel and today for our Jewish brothers and sisters. The Torah may be a mixed bag for us because it codifies some things, like slavery for instance, that we find unacceptable. Yet we can't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Reading scripture requires a careful and serious effort to find the veins of God's truth hiding in the sometimes stony and unforgiving soil.

But there are some gems to be found. Take the Sabbath and the Jubilee, for instance. The Israelites lived in similar circumstances to everyone else in the Mediterranean, but they produced one of the most unique concepts in the seventh day Sabbath and the idea of a Jubilee. As Hebrew Bible scholar Rick Lowery states in his book Sabbath and Jubilee, there is a relationship between the weekly Sabbath observance and these larger "Sabbath-like" events such as the Jubilee Year, but the relationship is unclear. He believes that the Sabbath day each week represents a "little jubilee", like a Sunday for us can represent a "little Easter". It is a spiritual answer to very mundane issues. It is an enduring sign of the social solidarity and economic justice that is built in to the system as described in Torah...built into the lives of the Israelites on a daily, weekly and yearly basis.

What you hear in this small snippet from Deuteronomy is no less than a system of economic justice woven into the lives of the people who follow Torah. This passage from Deuteronomy lays out the following conditions: Every seven

years debts are forgiven. This is, it must be noted, relegated to only those members of the community, but is a bold statement nonetheless...and it evolves...by the time we get to Leviticus, the later version of the law stretches out further to foreigners. This system demands generosity to your neighbors and honest treatment in business dealings when the Sabbath year is approaching. It recognizes the inequity seemingly inherent in our lives and says that we must help those in need. It even recognizes the freeing of slaves every seven years, and not just freeing but freeing and sending them away with generous bounty, such as you are blessed with. It is a cyclical system – you give because you have been given to...you forgive because you have been forgiven...you love because you are loved. Jesus will later teach his followers the rabbinic derivative of this system – do unto others as you would have done unto you.

Even today, three thousand years later, this is a sweeping document. It is more radical than anything Marx or Engels ever wrote. It would be easy to dismiss this because of the patriarchal aspects or the clear proscription of slavery. And of course Deuteronomy is full of rules that can be hyper-literalized into a Taliban style authoritarian rule. That is a danger with any legal writings. Human beings in the modern era have a tendency towards literal interpretation, but the ancients' didn't. I'm intrigued by the passages and like what Jubilee USA has created with them. What I'm really concerned about though is the way that these instructions have us oriented. Where is God in all of this?

This is the real question because when we come in here we come not to think economically or politically but theologically. We come in here to think about what our spiritual call is in any given situation or issue. The problem is that these worlds cannot be so neatly divided. Our faith informs our politics. Our faith informs our economics. Our interaction in the world informs our faith. There is a legal separation of church and state – thank God! – but such a division does not exist in our hearts. So one of the reasons we come here is to help mediate those sometimes conflicting factions.

What the law is doing is reflecting a spiritual sensibility. It is regulating the activity of people not as a power play, but as spiritual discipline. We Americans don't really like authority very much, and those of us who call ourselves liberals like it even less. We cringe at someone telling us what to do. Yet, the Biblical narrative is clear. God is a God of love who has infused us with life and cares for Her creation, yet is not without regulation. Love demands that we behave in a certain way. There is, even within the open arms of a loving God, a place for discipline.

The ancient world was in very profound ways a very different place than where we live today. But in a basic sense there were still the same drives – provide for you and your family or loved ones, get enough food and water, rest some, take care of your physical needs and see to the livelihood of your generation and the next. And there was also the same drive to “get ahead”, the same urge to surpass others, to compete, to be recognized or achieve distinction of some kind. This is a very basic component of humanity – what psychologists often refer to as the “dominant impulse”. It is what drives us all to some extent and the ancients knew it too. Perhaps they knew also that while it stimulated some very useful activity and kept things moving, it had a destructive side as well.

See this portion of Torah seems to contend with this destructive tendency. It holds that “keeping up with the Joneses” mentality in check. It allows for the dominant impulse to flow, but not unchecked or undisciplined. It addresses the same issue the ancients share with us – too much work and not enough money. It is a commentary by the Jewish community against the royal–imperial system under which they often found themselves...Babylon, Persia, Rome...it would be an equally hard critique of capitalism as we know it today.

The ancients’ widely held belief was that goods were in limited supply. If one person accumulated more than their share, it robbed someone else. It was an ethical issue. The wisdom found in the Joseph story or in the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12 is that abundance is to be shared with the community, not hoarded and exploited for your own comfort because that is literally stealing from others. I’m not sure that we share the ancient’s belief in limited supply. In fact, it seems that we feel like there are unlimited resources. But there are some voices questioning that assumption. There is a movement both ecologically and economically saying that we need to be better stewards of what we have because it isn’t endless. When we forget our connection to one another and to the earth God created us with, then we risk exploitation instead of cooperation. We need to be faithful with what we have in order to have it abundantly.

Whether it is new recycling and “carbon–neutral” efforts, or a vast increase in corporation pledges to be more green and the promise of wind and solar energy, there is a revelation of environmental awareness but a seeming desert of awareness of how economic inequality threatens our community ecosystem and our long–term viability. Where is a call for “injustice–neutral” banking practices or the even more radical notion spelled out by Deuteronomy which calls for an “economic Sabbath” every seven years?

There is no shortage of voices in our media–driven culture calling for a “return to morality”. But in an environment in which “Biblical values” are

constantly lauded as the necessary governing force for a world gone mad with sin, why is this law never discussed? Why is this admonition from God not held in equal value with the ones that prohibit certain personal activities? Why is this not mentioned, even though the Hebrews thought it important enough to include in 3 different versions – the one I read from Deuteronomy, a similar passage from Exodus 21 and 23 and a long passage from Leviticus 25? The church is partly to blame – this passage from Deuteronomy is barely touched on in the lectionary structure, the associated passages from Exodus and Leviticus absolutely absent. When I searched for academic and pastoral studies on these passages there were shockingly few and most of them from the same couple of people. Why the avoidance of this issue?

Well, of course you know the answer to that as well as I do. The easy answer is that we'd rather deal with the texts that say something about "those people", the ones who are sinning who aren't us. We'd rather use the Bible to justify our own position rather than challenge us to live differently. The hard answer is that we probably love capitalism more than we love God. We probably love our way of life as we know it more than we love the chance to build the Kingdom. That's a cynical way to say it, but I think we know that there is some truth there...and I know the church knows it.

We have seen how dedicated we are to the system we have. We have just avoided the biggest economic collapse since the great depression by a hair's width and yet we have done nothing to change the system that caused it in the first place. Tempted beyond rationality by the lure of easy money, we trot again down the path of a consumer-driven economy with no apparent sense of how blind and sick we've become. We're setting ourselves up, many economists are warning, for a repeat offense only with much more dire consequences. There is no rest for a tired economy... no awareness of justice or a call to make our economics reflect a sense of morality that is desperately needed.

We have a prescription, you know. It isn't raising or lowering tax rates, interest rates or regulating the markets, though that might help. It isn't global aid or more shipments of food and medicine, though that is needed. We have a more powerful antibiotic at our disposal and it is found in this passage. It is God's economics. Can you imagine what our economic systems would look like if we forgave all debts every seven years? Would we have had this crisis at all? Would it even be possible to have an environment in which the average CEO earns more than 300 times what their base level employees earn?

The Sabbath and Jubilee stipulations are economic rules like we have never known because they infuse economics with ethics, something that seems alien in our current environment. This idea of resting both ourselves and the

earth, of building in honesty and generosity as expected parts of commerce and the radical idea that we would turn the economic tables over like an hourglass every 50 years would be a revolution. It might actually create God's reign. Contrary to what we have in place now, this structure counters greed and selfishness. Instead of fostering generational wealth or poverty, it places detriments to both and allows that even if they do exist, there is a statute of limitations on them. Most importantly, it moves our framework for human relationship away from competition and towards mutual care.

What if instead of a consumer-driven economy we had a steward-driven economy? What if we decided that the community we make up as people together was more important than our bank account or the number of cars we own? What if we governed that dominant impulse enough to know that it is more important for us to care than to compete? What if we treated ownership, contracts and loans as moral statements, because that's what they are? What if we governed ourselves and one another with mercy and grace because we were reflecting God's mercy and grace?

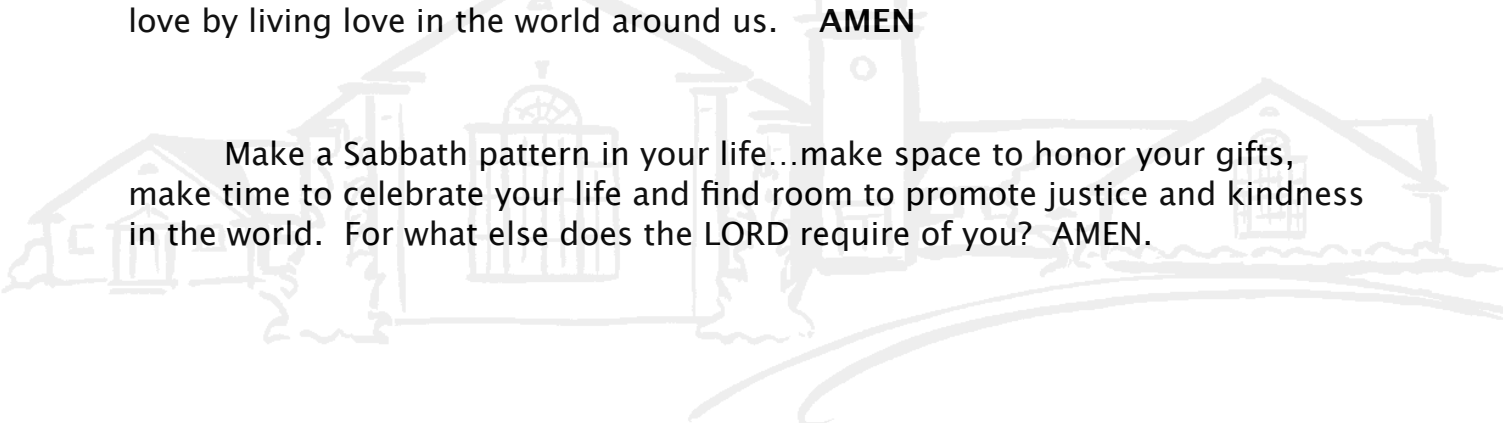
See this is the real challenge of the Jubilee, not debt relief but a new way of being in the world. Just like the Sabbath and Jubilee laws were a daily part of the Israelites' lives, so too this idea of living lives of incarnate grace needs to permeate our daily existence. There will be an opportunity for you to look at Jubilee USA documents and even to pledge to support the Jubilee Act in Congress - an attempt to get the US to relieve developing countries of the debt they owe us. I want you to look at that information and to support it. But even more than this I want you to consider how we interact with one another and how that reciprocal flow of getting grace and being graceful works.

You have, no doubt, heard the old adage "it's the thought that counts". But this is more than just what we tell our kids to think when Aunt Betsy gets the socks for Christmas - again! It really is the spiritual lesson, because it is the thought - or more specifically the thought-guided action - that counts. It is how we are directed and what directs us that matters. A thousand dollars given in coercion is not as good as one dollar given in love. That's maybe not what a non-profit director will tell you, but it is the spiritual truth. It is the thought that counts.

Nicaragua is like every other place in the world. The hardships are borne on the backs of the "least of these"...the poor, the women, the children. And in the case of deaf children, the lowest rung of the ladder was all that was available. The mission work that we are doing there is a substantial effort to change very real aspects of life for some of the most marginalized in that country, and it is helping a lot. Yet what is needed is more than just a shift in

the lives of several dozen people in Jinotega. What is needed is more than just charity, it is systemic change.

Here's the message – the world, God's vision of the world – sets us in partnership with one another and with the very planet God has created with us. It sets us in a pattern of solidarity, where those who struggle find release and those who work find rest. This stands in sharp contrast to the world the ancients knew and the world in which we live as well. But the promise endures. The same promise from the same God Jesus refers to when he teaches his disciples how to pray...we just said it...forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. The ever-present liberating God of Israel, the God who stood with the captives in Egypt and who called to them to remember their freedom and to live that out in all things they do still calls to us...asking us to remember our blessing by blessing, to remember our hope by hoping and to remember God's love by living love in the world around us. **AMEN**



Make a Sabbath pattern in your life...make space to honor your gifts, make time to celebrate your life and find room to promote justice and kindness in the world. For what else does the LORD require of you? **AMEN.**

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