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Pay Attention to the Birds

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A Bible study on Luke 12, ecology, and economics.



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Jesus said to his disciples, “I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear ... Consider the ravens: They neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. —Luke 12:22-24



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To our ears, this text seems simplistic, extreme, or naive. And in the wake of the recent global meltdown of financial markets, Jesus’ counsel not to be anxious seems frankly absurd. If we Christians pay attention to this scripture at all, it is sentimentalized as Jesus’ cute but irrelevant “St. Francis moment.” The notion of an economic relationship with nature unmediated by our industry (in both senses) is, well, for the birds.

This is because Jesus' vision here cuts deeply against the grain of our most sacred modern assumptions about the relationship between economics, the environment, and faith. We do not believe nature is personal or beneficent, but that our material survival depends upon our technological ability to re-engineer it. Our functional faith (despite our religious professions) lies in our ability to manage scarce resources in a way that promotes economic growth (and market advantage). But the recent economic crisis, as well as growing disparities in wealth and a looming ecological apocalypse, are forcing us to question these orthodoxies.

A few years ago journalist William Greider wrote, "The operating principles of capitalism have become dangerously obsolete. The house of economics is due for major renovation, if not a complete tear-down ... As it presently functions, capitalism encourages human pathologies—embodying irresponsibility as a central requirement in its operating routines." He concluded, "Above all, we need a new narrative of American capitalism."

Greider's remarkable dictum represents an "evangelical opening" for people of faith. If the economic story into which we've been socialized and around which our culture is organized is deeply flawed and unsustainable, then perhaps we can hear biblical narratives with new ears and new openness.

Luke 12:13-34 is a good test case. It is a "text of terror," requiring us to confront the three primary pathologies of modern economic culture—*anxiety, alienation, and addiction*. But it also helps us with the urgent task of revising the economic story that is killing us and the planet, by articulating the social and cosmological foundations of "Sabbath Economics."

Jesus' teaching consists of two parts. The first section (12:13-21) addresses the problem of "affluenza." Jesus uses the negative object lesson of a rich farmer who can't hoard enough in order to warn us against the lethal power of "greed" (12:15). The second section (12:22-34) addresses the deeper problem of our alienation from what Wendell Berry calls the "Great Economy" of creation. Jesus counterposes two positive object lessons from nature that testify to divinely underwritten sufficiency for all. Each section concludes with a proverb about real "treasure" (12:21, 34).

The sequence begins with a dispute over inheritance (Greek *kleronomia*, literally a "distribution of properties," 12:13f). Rabbis often played the role of legal arbiter, and this man approaches Jesus for help with a "just settlement." But the Nazarene, aware that inheritance laws functioned to pass on class privilege intergenerationally (as they do still today), instead uses the conflict as an opportunity to address deeper issues.

"Guard yourselves against every form of greed" he begins (12:15a). The Greek word *pleonexia* (insatiability, avarice) is related to the verbs *pleonazo* ("to have too much" or "grow too big," see 2 Cor. 8:15) and *pleonekteo* ("to take advantage of or defraud," see 2 Cor. 2:11, 7:2; 12:17f; 1 Thess. 4:6). Jesus understands greed not as a moral category, but as a lethal, predatory force. It represents the primal sin of "taking too much," as first articulated in the Exodus story of the manna, the foundational text of Sabbath Economics (Ex. 16:16-18). Universally condemned in antiquity as one of the three greatest sins (see Mark 7:22; Rom. 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:10f; Eph. 4:19), in the New Testament greed is tantamount to idolatry (Col. 3:5, Eph. 5:5).

Jesus' antidote is a proverb that can be translated "We are not what we own" (12:15b). The Greek *huparchonton* is analogous to the English "belongings," and is used often by Luke. Possessions typically characterize large estate holders (12:44; 16:1) and are what the "strong man" seeks to protect (11:21), which is why disciples ultimately must "renounce" them (14:33). Luke's story culminates with Zacchaeus distributing half his *huparchonton* to the poor (19:8), while his Acts "sequel" begins with the Pentecostal community

redistributing *huparchonton* (Acts 4:32). Rather than “belonging to our belongings,” we should use them to build community.

To illustrate, Jesus spins a story about a wealthy farmer (12:16-21), the first of three sobering Lukan parables about “rich men” (the other two occur in Luke 16, where they bookend Jesus’ teaching on mammon: 16:1-13, 19-31). His concern in these unflattering portraits is not just to critique affluenza, but to assert an alternative to ruling-class cosmology.

The parable begins with the theme Jesus will shortly highlight: “The land of a rich man brought forth great fruit” (12:16). That the earth, not the farmer, was responsible for the abundance (see Mark 4:26-28) acknowledges that God provides sustenance through the earth’s natural fertility (Is. 55:10). The conditions for our material sufficiency are a divine gift—our job is to follow God’s instructions on how to “gather” it equitably and sustainably (Ex. 16:4ff).

This view is ignored in the wealthy landowner’s “internal dialogue,” which is a parody of wrong thinking—and sounds exactly like most financial counseling today. His singular concern is how to store and consume his agricultural surplus privately. Note the proliferation of the first-person singular:

a) What shall *I* do?

I have nowhere to **store** my crops;

b) *I* shall do this:

I will pull down *my* storehouses and build larger ones; and there *I* will **store** all *my* grain and *my goods*;

c) And *I* will say to *my* soul, “You have many **goods** laid up for many years; take it easy, eat, drink, and enjoy yourself!” (Luke 12:17-19).

The last verb (*euphrainou*, to make merry in a feast) alludes to the third of Luke’s rich man parables, where the decadent Dives “feasted every day” while Lazarus starved at his gate (16:19).

Though this farmer sees his prosperity as an entitlement, it was assumed in antiquity that inordinate wealth was built on the backs of others. Large estates typically expanded by expropriating the lands of smallholders through debt foreclosure. In Jesus’ view, therefore, this bumper crop should have occasioned redistribution to those in need—as reparation!

Instead, the farmer purposes to stockpile his surplus “for many years” (12:19), anticipating future lean times when prices would be driven up and profits greater. While this strategy may seem like a no-brainer to our modern market logic, it clearly contradicts the instructions of Exodus 16 not to concentrate the gift of manna, but to keep it circulating so that everyone has enough (Ex. 16:19-21). This parable is a classic illustration of *pleonexia* (avarice).

The punch line comes sharply: God calls the farmer a “fool” (12:20f). This reveals the tale as a *midrash* on two Hebrew Bible texts. The psalmist speaks of the “practical atheism” of those who live in contempt of the Divine economy and of the poor: “Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God’ ... those who eat up my people as they eat bread” (Ps. 14:1, 4). And Jeremiah (in a bird metaphor) declares, “Like the partridge hatching what it did not lay, so are all who amass wealth unjustly; in mid-life it will leave them, and at their end they will prove to be fools” (Jer. 17:11).

The parable ends ironically, with the very question with which the inheritance dispute began: “These things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (Luke 12:20). Jesus’ conclusion makes explicit the contrast between the presumption of human economies and the divine economy of grace (12:21). The logic here is that the Great Economy precedes us and survives us; private accumulation is thus a desperate, but ultimately short-term, hedge against the inevitable economic redistribution that comes with mortality. Conversely, God’s commonwealth is the only thing that endures, the true “treasure.” The ownership paradigm must therefore be shifted from “mine” to “ours.”

Having established economic justice as the plumb line of Sabbath Economics, the second part of Jesus’ teaching turns to its deeper underpinnings in the cosmology of grace. In 12:22f he says, “For this reason I tell you not to be anxious!” This is a command, not a suggestion, and is repeated in refrain in what follows (25, 26).

His counsel provides striking contrast to the rich farmer’s strategy. Rich man: I will say to my soul (*psuche*) ... take it easy, *eat*. Jesus: Don’t be anxious for your life (*psuche*), what you will *eat*.

Jesus understands that our preoccupation with “market security” blinds us to the truth of the Great Economy and asserts a counter-imperative (12:24, 27). The Greek *katanoesate* commands urgent action: “Refocus your attention!”

Jesus is no doubt pointing out his alternative object lessons as he walks through a field with his disciples. The truth is close at hand—if we pause long enough from our civilizational preoccupations to encounter what Aquinas called “the book of nature.” Or as Luther put it: “God writes the gospel not in the Bible alone, but on trees and flowers and clouds and stars.”

Two examples follow as a parallel doublet, each including an assurance about God’s cares and a reiteration not to be anxious (12:24-29):

- a) **Turn your attention** to the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn,
- b) and yet **God feeds** them. Of **how much more** value are you than the birds!
- c) And can any of you by being **anxious** add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?

In the second example:

- a) **Turn your attention** to the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.
- b) But if **God so clothes** the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, **how much more** will he clothe you—you of little faith!
- c) And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep being **anxious**.

Sadly, we modern folk have no intention of learning economics from birds and flowers. But to dismiss Jesus here is to miss the key to his alternative cosmology—and to our liberation. The raven (12:24) calls to mind three Hebrew Bible texts that praise the Creator’s gracious provision to all living things, particularly in times of hunger. Job 38:41 says, “Who provides for the raven its prey when its young ones cry to God and wander about for lack

of food?" Psalm 147:9 reads "God gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry." And the prophet Elijah is fed by a raven (1 Kings 17:4-6), a story that takes place during a famine and is followed by another "feeding miracle" (17:7-16).

Birds know nothing about the rich man's agriculture or barns, yet they can teach us about divine provision. Jesus invites us to have "eyes to see" a Great Economy from which we are deeply alienated, being utterly preoccupied by the works of our hands and our built environments, having objectified and commodified nature beyond recognition.

His teaching is not utopian ranting. "Utopia" was Thomas More's contemptuous term for the world that does not and cannot exist. Jesus, however, is talking about a very real world right in front of us: the alive, complex, interdependent world of the biosphere. Nor is Jesus suggesting an "unattainable ideal." This very cosmology has been embraced by indigenous peoples the world over and throughout history, whose economic lifeways were traditionally characterized by symbiosis with nature and by local, cooperative, and sustainable production and consumption.

The Bible is simply reminding us of the oldest wisdom on the planet. But we moderns long ago rejected it in favor of the delusion that we can defy every limit in our pursuit of artificially engineered "growth." Which is precisely what Jesus addresses next, warning us not to imagine that we can add a single cubit to our stature (12:25f; *prosthēnai*, from whence our word "prosthetics"). This is a metaphor for increasing our life span (as in Ps. 39:5-6, which also reminds us that we can't take possessions beyond the grave). The ancients understood the grace of finitude, but we are the children of Icarus: Our footprint is too big on the earth, and we are flying too close to the sun.

Jesus' second example is the wild lilies that bloomed around the Jordan Valley in early spring. They do not engage in hard labor such as spinning cloth. "But I'm telling you," urges Jesus with rhetorical insistence, "Solomon in all his glory was never 'wrapped around' like one of these." His reference to the sumptuous royal garb of Israel's most powerful king is probably a euphemism for the Jerusalem temple, the zenith of Israel's civilizational aspirations.

In other words, the greatest technological and social achievement known to his Judean contemporaries has less intrinsic value than one wildflower in the Divine economy. What if Jesus means it?

This is the opposite of our capitalist cosmology, which legitimizes the routine sacrifice of whole landscapes and species to the idols of technological hegemony and economic growth in a continuing holocaust of extraction and extinction. Mountain tops are blown off for coal and prairies poisoned for tar sand oil, while the baiji dolphin, the West African black rhino, and the Pyrenean ibex have disappeared forever. The World Conservation Union's 2003 *Red List of Threatened Species* included a fifth of all mammals across the globe, almost a third of all amphibians, more than a third of all gymnosperms, and significant percentages of all fish, flowering plants, mosses, and insects. And we think *Jesus* was crazy?

It is important to note that Jesus in Luke 12:29f is not invoking some heroic or ascetic imperative. He emphasizes that God is mindful of our legitimate material needs. Rather, he is repudiating the rich man's feasting in the shadow of his barns of greed (12:19), the kind of affluenza that "all the nations of the world hustle after" (12:30). Roman imperial culture was indeed awash in such addictive-compulsive behavior, and so is ours. We are taught to compete incessantly to accrue private wealth to satisfy our socialized appetites. Our nurturing heavenly parent, on the other hand, just wants to gift us with sustenance.

The vision here, as in Exodus 16, is of an economy of enough. If we seek the Great Economy, our life necessities will be “added” to us (12:31; same verb as verse 25). The rich man secured his food and drink by playing the market to his advantage, and couldn’t accumulate too much. Disciples are to trust in a different economic cosmology in which it is the Creator’s “pleasure” to gift sustenance for everyone (12:32).

This is why we can feel free to communitize our assets with a special concern for the poorest—which is what Jesus abruptly commands us to do (12:33). His rationale is simple: thieves can’t steal what isn’t hoarded, and moths can’t eat what isn’t stored up (James employs this same image in his rant against murderous affluenza, James 5:1-5). Jesus will shortly make this same discipleship demand of another rich man—which is rejected (Luke 18:22-24). Anticipating this, the teaching concludes by reiterating the moral to the parable of the barns: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will also be” (12:34).

“Pay attention to the spotted owl,” urges Jesus. “Blather!” responds the severe voice of modern economic orthodoxy we have internalized. The history of “Progress” has been predicated on the belief that nature is an object to exploit for our industrial purposes, and that value is only what we impute through our relentless pillaging of the biosphere for profit.

Yet this project has clearly brought both ecological and socio-economic systems to the brink of collapse. So who is the “fool” here? Shall we trust in an economic cosmology that sustained human life for 100,000 years or more, or one that may not last another 100?

Our crisis is one of political imagination; of will, not way. There are plenty of practical proposals outlining paths to a sustainable future, such as bioregional, steady-state economics (see for example [www.steady](http://www.steady.org) [7] state.org). But we won’t embrace them as long as we are captive to our capitalist cosmology. We need a new economic story—or rather an old one.

Jesus invites us back into the divinely sustained web of life, in which economic behavior is meant to serve social and ecological relationships, beginning with the “least” and most vulnerable. Community, communion, and restraint are at the center of this alternative economic story. As people of faith, let us not be embarrassed to invoke this biblical wisdom as we struggle to discover a sustainable future. It invites all of us “who have ears to hear” to listen to the birds in order to relearn Sabbath Economics, a vision whose time has come again.

Ched Myers, most recently co-author with Elaine Enns of Ambassadors of Reconciliation (Orbis, 2009), works with Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries. This is adapted from a May 2009 talk he gave in Washington, D.C., and its themes will be explored in the February 2010 Bartimaeus Institute (www.bcm-net.org [8]).

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