

The Greater Economy

Amos 8:4-7

Farmville Baptist Church

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When you are the parent of a young child, you quickly find that you are paying attention to things you would never have noticed otherwise, or at least would have only noted in passing. I can go into great detail with you over the various pups of the Paw Patrol, for example, and our family can sing along to every song in *Encanto* and *Moana*. Do you know the name of the new main character on the reboot of *Blue's Clues*? I do – it's Josh. And I found out this week that Book-It is no longer apparently a program to encourage reading at Pizza Hut – the best corporate program ever, by the way. Now it's an educational game that my son plays at school to

earn points to buy new ‘skins’ for his avatar. But hey, as long as it encourages him to read, I’m ok with that!

Because we exist in the digital media ecosystem targeted at young children, I noted the announcement of the next Disney live-action movie with more interest than I would have without my children in mind. The first *Little Mermaid* was released when I was about Jonathan’s age, and while I loved the songs, it wasn’t my favorite Disney movie. I didn’t like that the evil queen, Ursula, turned mermaids into shrimp and then ate them. I didn’t watch the movie more than once or twice. But I’m familiar with the story. And now that the movie has a live-action version, I’m fascinated by one thing: how did they film the scenes so they look like they are taking place underwater?

Obviously, showing mermaids and talking fish and what-not is fairly easy to do in an animated film; you just draw it,

or, in today's world, design it on the computer. But making it look like air-breathing actors and actresses are moving, talking, *breathing*, underwater...well that's pretty impressive. I might watch the movie just to see how that's done!

While I was thinking about this during the week, it made me think about the things we take for granted – things like breathing air. Do you think about breathing air during the day? Probably not most of the time. In fact, it's kind of fascinating that we have a bodily function – breathing – that can be controlled by conscious thought – we can take in a deep breath or hold our breath – but then when our mind moves on to other things, it reverts to automatic pilot. Most of the time, we don't think ~~any more~~ about the air we breathe, and the act of breathing, any more than a fish or a shark, or a mermaid for that matter, thinks about drawing in

oxygen from the water in which they swim. It's just the environment in which we exist, and living our lives here, above water, is for us as natural as, well, breathing.

Which brings me to the prophet Amos.

Odd, I know. Amos, who lived around 760 years before Jesus, was not a respiratory therapist or a doctor, a healer or a medical man. He wasn't a sailor, either, and we have no evidence he ever went out on the sea. If we were talking about Jonah, we could speculate if he saw any mermaids on his one-way trip to a fish's belly – but this is Amos, a shepherd in Judah who felt an unavoidable calling to go to the northern kingdom of Israel with a prophetic word of warning – a particularly fiery one at that. What does Amos have to do with mermaids in the ocean or even the very air we breathe?

A lot, actually.

Because, while Amos isn't talking about oxygen and atmosphere, ocean water and gills, he is talking about an environment in which people lived and how they took that environment for granted – so much for granted that they lived within it unconsciously, never even thinking about what they were doing as part of that world. Amos is talking about the economy of his day – or at least how those who are getting ahead in that economy are behaving – and he is not a fan.

That might strike the casual observer of ancient Israel as strange. After all, Amos was prophesying at a time when things were looking up for the northern kingdom. The two superpowers on either side of Israel – Assyria and Egypt – were going through a period where they were less aggressive. Israel's king, Jeroboam II, built up the military and expanded the bounds of the northern kingdom's borders.

There was peace, of a sort – the kingdom wasn't being invaded, and any fighting was done at the king's whim for expansion, not a desperate fight against overwhelming outside forces. And there were people in Israel who were doing ok – who were doing more than ok. While this wasn't a capitalist free market, like the United States and much of the Western world, this was an economy where there was money to be made and wealth to be had – and a few people, especially the king and those close to him, were doing quite well for themselves. Quite well indeed.

But at what cost? And who is paying that price?

The prophet Amos has a clear answer to that: the poor. The needy. The destitute. Over and over in this short book named after the prophet, Amos points out the obvious fact that the luxuries enjoyed by the wealthy of Israel are only possible because of the exploitation of the poor, and that the

wealth of the well-off should be in the pockets of the needy who suffer in destitution. This is an affront, Amos says throughout the book and especially in our passage today – an affront not just to him...but an affront to God. And this obvious injustice will certainly lead to an obvious reaction by the Lord who consistently hears, over and over in their own history, the cries of the poor, the desperate, and the oppressed, ^{interceding} ~~and intercedes~~ for them in powerful, even frightening, ways.

Except that this isn't apparently obvious to Jeroboam, his toadies, and the wealthy of Israel, who Amos famously called "cows of Bashan" in Amos 4:1. They are going right on their pampered, comfortable way in life, completely clueless – or maybe willfully ignorant – of how the economy they've benefited from harms others, a lot of others, and how God views all of that. They're so enmeshed in the economy they

have created and live within that they don't see the places where it is failing to meet God's desires for justice and care of neighbor – instead, this economic exploitation is as natural to them as breathing. And Amos is trying to get them to pay attention.

I wonder if maybe he's also trying to get us to pay attention.

Now, before I go any further today, I want to say up front that Amos is not saying that commerce, business, economic activity itself is evil. As one commentator puts it, "Amos does not condemn the practice of buying and selling itself...it is necessary for daily life."¹ But Amos does say that what we do with our money, how we live our lives in the marketplace of our economy, what sort of business we conduct and how we conduct it, how we deal with others, what prices we use

¹ Working Preacher

for buying and selling – in short, how we live in an economic sense – matters. It matters to God.

Someone who has been incredibly helpful to me in understanding this passage is the American farmer and writer, Wendell Berry. An advocate for small farms and local economies, Berry is also a prolific fiction author, a poet, and an important voice for environmental concerns. ~~And~~ Berry also happens to be a devout Christian. In his essay “Two Economies,” published in 1987, he speaks of little economies – the economic practices of our society or any society, in our case free-market capitalism – and the Great Economy, which is, he says, another name for the Kingdom of God. The Great Economy, the Kingdom of God, is God’s understanding of the world as it should be, the world that is the way he made it and will one day remake it. It is how the things, people, totality of creation brings value to life and is valued by life.

And, while the Kingdom of God is not fully realized on earth due to the sinfulness of humanity and the presence of real evil in our world and in our hearts, it remains the goal – and in Jesus Christ, that goal has started to come to fruition. As followers of Jesus, then, our calling is to seek now the Kingdom of God, to live as if the Kingdom of God is already here, and in our faithful living to bring it more and more into being – or, as we prayed just a little while ago, “thy ^{thy kingdom come} will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

If we really believe that, Berry suggests, then how we operate in our little economy – the buying and selling of our day, the economic system that is the air we breathe – how we live in the midst of that should reflect the Great Economy, the Kingdom of God. He says in his essay, “We may say, then, that we seek the Kingdom of God, in part, by our economic behavior, and we fail to find it if that behavior is

wrong.”² All who are God’s people, in other words, are to live with God’s commands and God’s way of living and viewing the world as their ultimate guide, and hold all other perspectives and guides for life up to that standard. Where they match up...great! But where they don’t, we are to follow the way of God, the path of Jesus, even if it puts us out of step with those around us.

This includes the economic parts of our lives.

As I said earlier, Amos isn’t arguing that buying and selling is wrong. It isn’t! *Or, at least, it doesn't have to be.* Economies, whether we’re talking about the simple barter systems of the first humans to settle down all the way to the intricate free-market globalized economies of the present day, economies are how we provide for ourselves and our families, share the goods and services of the community, and manage and steward the resources of

² Wendell Berry, “Two Economies,” in Library of America edition, p. 604

God's good earth. Wendell Berry says that almost any economic system we create and perpetuate can be good, as long as "the human economy fit[s] harmoniously within" and "correspond[s] to the Great Economy," his language for the Kingdom of God.³ Yet he says it is also possible, and I would say that it is often the case in our world, in our society, and in our own community, for the economy we live in, the economic air we breathe, to fail this test. And when it does, it drops the moral ball and creates incredible harm to the creation God values – including human beings.

Amos describes this in our passage today. The economy of his day includes Jewish people who violate both the spirit and the letter of the Jewish law. The many festivals of biblical Jewish practice were all associated with economic relief and the celebration of life free from the yoke of labor.

³ Berry 604.

Longing for them to be shortened so that money can be made again – well, that is essentially idolatry in the eyes of the prophets like Amos. Using dishonest weights is the 8th century BC equivalent of cooking the books, cutting corners to maximize profit by cheating the customer. And the verse about buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals is, according to one scholar, a reference to the wealthy offering loans of grain – the very basic food needed for life – to the poor at such exorbitant price or via such dishonest means that the poor could never repay and be forced to become debt-slaves for life.⁴ Such practices – earning excessive profit through dishonest means that endanger and enslave others – is explicitly not in step with either the law of the people of Israel or the spirit behind the

⁴ Donald E. Gowan, “The Book of Amos” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. VII, p. 416.

law given by God...and yet it had become the norm. It was as accepted as breathing the air.

Is it for us? Wendell Berry suggests it is. He says, “It is possible to make a little economy, such as our present one, that is so short-sighted and in which accounting is of so short a term as to give the impression that vices are necessary and practically justifiable....If our economic ideal is maximum profit with minimum responsibility, why should we be surprised to find our corporations so frequently in court and robbery on the increase? Why should we be surprised to find that medicine has become an exploitative industry?⁵ ”

It doesn't have to be that way, though. Berry goes on to say, “If, on the other hand, we see ourselves as living within the Great Economy,...then we see that the traditional virtues are necessary and are practically justifiable. Then, because

⁵ Berry, 615, 616

in the Great Economy all transactions count and the account is never ‘closed,’ the ideal changes. We see that we cannot afford maximum profit or power with minimum responsibility because, in the Great Economy, the loser’s losses finally afflict the winner.”⁶

I think Amos would agree with Mr. Berry that the guiding light for God’s people – for both congregations and for individuals seeking to live faithfully in the secular world – is to try and bring the values of the Great Economy into the day-to-day of business, of commerce, of buying and selling, and of interacting with other people. That should be easy to accept, but it actually is one of the hardest parts of being a follower of Jesus. Why? Because it’s like breathing underwater – it’s not natural for us. We, all of us, have been born into, raised, and live each day in a little economy that is

⁶ Berry 616

not the Kingdom of God. No economy is, to be sure, but ours isn't, either – and if we aren't careful, we may breathe the air of our times so unconsciously that we fail to even recognize the ways we live according to the way of the world instead of the way of Christ.

To do otherwise takes intention – but that intention can become a habit for us. It did for a man named Aaron Feuerstein. In 1995, a textile factory in Massachusetts burned to the ground, injuring twenty-five workers and putting almost 1400 out of work only weeks before Christmas. Mr. Feuerstein was the CEO of the company and had a decision to make: take the opportunity to close the factory or move it to a cheaper location, or rebuild it? He chose the rebuild path; he also elected to pay employee salaries during the reconstruction. After it reopened, product sales and employee productivity soared, but the debt

incurred by rebuilding and retooling created significant financial shortfalls. Eventually the company had to be sold; the employees continued to have jobs, but Feuerstein lost his company and his position as CEO.

Feuerstein didn't have to make that decision. His was a privately-held company; he could have taken the \$300 million fire-insurance settlement and not worried about his 1400 employees forced to scramble for new jobs. That would have been socially acceptable in our free-market, survival of the fittest economy. But Mr. Feuerstein, who had the sole authority to manage his company as he pleased, chose to do something different. And what he chose to do "was to apply the ethics of the Jewish Torah to his contemporary situation. 'You are not permitted to oppress the working man, because he's poor and he's needy, amongst your brethren and

amongst the non-Jew in your community,’ said Feuerstein.”⁷

Taking this teaching to heart, Mr. Feuerstein took the \$300 million from the insurance settlement, and borrowed another \$100 million, to build a new, environmentally-conscious and worker-friendly, textile factory. “This mill is still active today and remains the largest employer in the community. Thus Feuerstein considered his own interests, the interests of his employees, and the interests of the community and made the ‘business’ decision he believed was ultimately the best for all involved.”⁸

What Aaron Feuerstein did may not have been consistent with the principles of modern economic practice – but it strikes me as something consistent with the Great Economy of God. Dallas Willard, a theologian and author, said that what Mr. Feuerstein did is the sort of situation

⁷ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy Continued*, 212.

⁸ Willard, 212.

“where a beachhead of the kingdom of God emerges. [...]

This is an example of the kingdom at work, confounding the wise, foolishness to some, yet beautifully compelling to others.”⁹ And I think the prophet Amos would have agreed – because he says, “The Lord has sworn by the Pride of Jacob: ‘I will never forget anything they have done.’”¹⁰

What do we want God to remember about us? Each of us participates in the economy of our time. We are consumers, we are producers, we are contributors, we are supporters. Like in all other areas of our lives, does our economic behavior reflect the concerns of God? Are we living in and participating in the little economy of our day with the view of the Great Economy of God in mind? Do our purchases and our sales, do our investments and our dividends, our necessities and our luxuries – do they reflect

⁹ Willard, 213.

¹⁰ Amos 8:7

the values of the kingdom of God like love of neighbor, care of creation, and storing our treasure in the kingdom and not in the things of earth? And at the end of the day, will God remember that we ignored his way for the standards of the little economy of our time...or will he remember that we chose to live into and bring about, in some small way, the Greater Economy, the Kingdom of God?