

Proper 20 Year A 2026

1929 was the year of the Great Depression, still the most severe economic collapse our nation has ever known... but it didn't just happen out of the blue. There were reasons, intentional choices made that led to the economic meltdown. In the late 1920's the euphoria of the Industrial Revolution had lost its steam. American industry had over-produced creating a surplus of product which led to falling prices. Most of the capital in the country was held by an elite few, and that capital, and the accumulation of profits, were parlayed into an unregulated and unsophisticated stock market. Banks and other financial institutions invested their capital in the markets as well. Many people scrambled to invest in the soaring stock market, and many bought stocks on margin.... that is, they borrowed money with which to invest. Speculation became the means of acquiring wealth in lieu of production. The United States' involvement in World War One had created a massive government debt which caused a severe tightening of credit. When prices of goods began to collapse, the profits of manufacturers dropped, as did their stock prices. It was a perfect storm.

On October 24, 1929 it all came apart. The stock market dropped by 25% in just two days. Companies and individuals found themselves financially under

water. Banks called loans due, which couldn't be repaid. There was a mad dash for cash, which the banks no longer had. America was in an economic depression. Capitalism, the great economic ideal, had failed. Adam Smith, the ideological father of modern capitalism, expounded his theory of free enterprise during the era when the freedom of the individual was extolled, during the so-called humanist renaissance of the eighteenth century when freedom, both for individuals and nations, was the highest virtue. Such heady aspirations spawned revolutions in France and in America. Freedom was God's gift to humanity. It was argued that free enterprise could be trusted; that an individual's economic interest would translate to the interests of the whole; that the profit motive would inherently self-correct. What Smith and others failed to see was the effect of greed, and moreover, his economic theory only applied to those with wealth. He once said that the poor were only poor because of the poverty of their aspirations.

In the western world, ours was an economic system forged by the elite for the elite. It was begotten in the name of freedom, for some. Women and people of color were left out; but its foundation, at its heart, was greed. Sin, in short. Sin, that is, the infrastructure of a system. If a system's foundation is greed, then that is what the system will serve. The point I want to make is: When we speak of sin

after the manner by which biblical writers spoke; then we speak of sin as structural. The scribes of biblical literature didn't so much consider our individual sins; they were much more concerned with the compromised and oppressive system under which they lived; an hierarchical system that disadvantaged the poor, and the marginalized, and the voiceless. That made the Jesus Movement counter-cultural, even subversive, perhaps revolutionary. At their peril they challenged the injustice of the status quo; injustice which engendered a pervasive lack of dignity among the non-elites, who were the vast majority of the population.

Our reading today in Matthew's Gospel is yet another parable about the system. Last week we read about a slave who was forgiven an enormous debt by his master, only to demand payment of a debt owed to him. Matthew is highlighting the coercive and capricious, and ultimately violent nature of a system foundering under the burden of debt. The resolution for this parable being: How many times do we forgive? And Matthew is speaking of debt here. How many times? Seventy times seven. Matthew is not so much being metaphorical as he is demanding economic justice of the system.

Today's parable follows. And it has to be read in the context of last week's Gospel that appears just two chapters before in Matthew. This parable has to do with wage earning within a predatory system. Unemployed day laborers are hanging out in the market square hoping for a day's work. To the landowner they are cheap labor. The landowner hires some for a full day's work; others for a half day; and still others for just an hour or so... and then he pays them all for a full day. The ones hired for a full day are livid because of what they perceive as an injustice.... I think we all see the workers' point. That ain't the way the system works... Commentator after commentator will tell us that this story is about God's generosity, about wastefully sharing the wealth; but that doesn't square with Matthew's agenda. Matthew's point is that the system doesn't work; that it is unjust. A denarii, a day's pay, was not a sustainable wage, whether one worked all day or just part of a day. These laborers stand in the square day after day hoping for a day's work that will do nothing to alleviate their poverty. Where's the dignity and justice and sustainability in that? We would call it slave labor. The real problem in this parable for Matthew is that the all-day workers are envious of the ones who get paid the same for a part of a day. There is no solidarity among them. Envy the first enemy. In the mythology of Genesis it is envy that invites violence into the world. Cain, you remember, murders Abel out of envy. The

system fueled by envy and greed forces division; it pits laborer against laborer. It undermines the solidarity of community in a world in which there is abundance. That's sin. Matthew will later in this Gospel speak of envy among the Jewish priests and scribes as the motive for Jesus' arrest and crucifixion.

Envy is the blood brother of greed... and a system that runs on envy and greed cannot stand. It only breeds shame and resentment and violence. One only need watch the news these days. The landowner claims to appear generous in this instance; or tell himself so. But he's no hero... The workers are after all... exploited cheap labor. I doubt the hearers of this parable would have had much regard for the landowner. The system is his system. So, my take on the parable: Forget the mathematics of punching a judicious clock.... Not paying a living wage is Sin... sin undermines human dignity; sin shames a society. Sin is what Jesus came to vanquish.

Salvation, that ubiquitous word in scripture, is at its heart about the dignity and well-being of community. And dignity and well-being can't thrive in a system founded on greed and envy. Our Capitalist system is just that, and it is failing again... Our political system, and thus our economy, with all its corporate dark money, is driven by self-interest and greed, and it may well destroy our republic.

Our politicians now answer to corporate lobbyists, the acolytes of capitalism. The New Deal in the Nineteen Thirties gave us respite from the collapse of 1929, but it was a temporary fix, alas. New Deal economics has, for the last forty six years, been undermined by the elitist capitalist structure. Our social and economic life is now more than ever governed by greed and the profit motive, and more and more of us are being disenfranchised and shamed by it. The rise of a middle class, and single income families spawned by the industrial revolution, has been subverted by the powerful who call the shots in an elitist capitalist system in which wealth, more and more is held by the elite few. The fact that billionaires even exist, tells us all we need to know.

For centuries the church has focused on our individual sins... the nasty little things we do...Ironically, that has enabled the church to abdicate its true responsibility, which is to resist and challenge and change the structures of our society that fail to bring well-being and dignity... We are, to put it biblically, to forgive sin... which in the Greek means to 'send off.' Salvation for the least of our world is to rid the system of its sin; at least, challenge it; name it; to send off injustice and indignity. Salvation is about the restoration of community, a welcoming circle that seeks to include all in God's abundance. That means, for example, an equitable tax structure, in which the wealthy pay their fair share.

That's a Gospel issue. Our tax structure now is in shambles. It is Sinful. Systemic racism, America's so-called original sin, which discriminates socially, economically, and politically based on the illusory concept of race... that is the church's business. Black males live in a virtual police state in this country. Access to affordable healthcare is an issue of well-being and dignity for the community. Our for-profit system as it stands is 'sinful.' And becoming unaffordable and inaccessible. Healing is the church's business. Those wishing to immigrate to this country for a better life are now being shamed and abused and deported; their families torn apart. Scripture tells us again and again to welcome the immigrant. The immigration system, at least as it is being managed by the current administration, is sinful. We need a humane policy that is dignified and just. That is a Gospel issue. It is sinful that in the wealthiest country in the world, forty percent of our population live in poverty. Think about that. That is Sin... and it is said that we're a Christian nation. And finally, it is sinful that our leadership in government is dishonest and manipulative, serving their own personal interests. Tyranny is sin. The poet Dante called it the greatest of sins.

These are not partisan issues... these are moral issues, Gospel issues... and that makes them our issues. The proclamation of the Gospel is simply this: "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." That is Jesus'

legacy, and it is ours... to take away the sins of the world. So, we need to get busy. We need to keep showing up. Our vocation is to bring God's mutual and egalitarian reign in earth. As the crucial midterm election approaches, don't underestimate the power that is our right and responsibility to vote. Don't underestimate the power of people assembled for a just cause. People gathered in enlightened community can change things. Know that God is in this with us whenever and wherever we are gathered... Know that God is Love, and the means of love is justice... and that Love will prevail. Sin can't stand against it... I just pray that Love prevails sooner than later.