

Sermon: Sabbath Economics

This sermon was delivered at Fairfield Friends Meeting, Mooresville, IN, on April 20, 2008 by Roland Kreager, General Secretary, Right Sharing of World Resources

Good morning. It is a joy to be with you this morning, and to have partaken of your kind hospitality the last three days. This morning I would like to speak about right sharing. The right sharing I would like to speak about is not the organization which by capitalizing the “R” and “S” as part of Right Sharing of World Resources. Rather, I would like to focus on right sharing, spelled with a lower case “r” and “s”, the idea.

Anyone who knows me knows that I think Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer and writer, writes gospel. So, I will start with Wendell and a story he tells. Something like 20 years ago, while talking with a friend about economics (particularly the economics of farming) he wondered aloud what might constitute a comprehensive economy, what would it look like? His friend quickly answered, “The Kingdom of God”. What grew from this interchange was an essay titled “Two Economies”.

Wendell understood that, while the phrase “ Kingdom of God ” was fine with him, saying “it has not much been tainted or tampered with by the disinterested processes of academic thought; it is a phrase which comes to us with its cultural strings still attached”, it was not for everyone. However, as a communicator and writer, he knew that he needed a phrase which meant the same thing as “ Kingdom of God ”, but which used different words. The phrase he chose was, the Great Economy. This is the first of the two economies. The second economy is the one in which we live and breath, what Berry calls the industrial economy. My focus this morning is on the Great Economy, the Kingdom of God . I want to look at why we persons of faith are called to it, and what it might mean in fairly practical terms.

I am making three assumptions that I need to identify. First, while we are social, cultural and political people, we are also economic people and that this dynamic is a very basic part of who we are, how we relate to each other, and how we make decisions. Second, to one degree or another, we all live as if the industrial economy is the Great Economy. That is, the part of us which is economic is governed by the law of the industrial economy, the laws of supply and demand, scarcities, etc. Third, following from the second, we understand the industrial economy as so basic that it is virtually unquestioned. It is simply a given, the only “real” way to make sense of things, especially things economic. The Great Economy, in contrast, is often taken as something that is almost other-worldly and, while a wonderful ideal, simply can not have much to do with our “real” lives.

The Great Economy is, however, as Berry says, “both practical and spiritual ... then we must see it as prescribing the terms of a kind of little economy or human economy ... a Christian economy.” The core of this message is contained in Matthew 6:24-34 (I am

reading from my favorite version of the Bible, the Christian Community Bible: Catholic Pastoral Edition, the text often used in the base Christian communities of Central and South America . I also note, with apologies, the exclusive pronoun usage):

No one can serve two masters; for he will either hate one and love the other, or he will be loyal to the first and look down on the second. You cannot at the same time serve God and money. This is why I tell you not to be worried about food and drink for yourself, or about clothes for your body. Is not life more important than food and is not the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow, they do not harvest and do not store food in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than birds? Which of you can add a day to his life by worrying about it? Why are you so worried about your clothes? Look at the flowers in the fields how they grow. They do not toil or spin. But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his wealth was clothed like one of these. If God so clothes the grass in the field which blooms today and is to be burned tomorrow in an oven, how much more will he clothe you? What little faith you have! Do not worry and say: What are we going to eat? What are we going to drink? Or: what shall we wear? The pagans busy themselves with such things; but your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. Set your heart first on the kingdom and justice of God and all these things will also be given to you. Do not worry about tomorrow for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Of this text, Berry says, “ If this passage meant for us to seek only the Kingdom of God , it would have the odd result of making good people not only feckless but also dependent upon bad people busy with quite other seekings. It says, rather, to seek the Kingdom of God first ; that is, it gives an obviously necessary priority to the Great Economy over any little economy [here, we would read human-made] made within it.”

This brings us to two points. First, as persons of faith we are particularly called to fit our economic selves within the context of the Great Economy, to seek first the Kingdom of God, God’s desire and plan for the continued wellbeing of creation. Second, the Great Economy is practical and, as such, serves as a means by which we can order our lives to both fit within the God-given order of creation and to be a part of repairing the damage that we humans have done.

Thankfully, Matthew outlines for us the way of the road. We have also been given some of the tools necessary to pave this roadway with something more than good intentions. The one set of tools that I would like to lift up this morning grows from the Jubilee tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures in which wealth is adjusted every seven, and seven times seven, years. This is most often read from Deuteronomy 15:1-18. I am reading verses 1-5, “Every seven years you shall pardon debts, You shall do this in the following manner: the creditor shall pardon any debt of his neighbor or brother, and shall stop exacting it of him because Yahweh’s pardon has been proclaimed. You may demand that a foreigner pay back his debts but you shall pardon the debt of your brother.

However you should have no poor in your midst for Yahweh will give you prosperity to the land that you have conquered. If you listen to the voice of Yahweh, your God, and obey all that he has commanded you, which I now remind you of, he will bless you as he promised.” From this root has grown the recent movement to release the poorest countries from debt. There is now, too, a growing movement, called Sabbath Economics, to apply these ideas to individuals, families, and local communities.

Ched Myers, in his small book *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*, says, “The Bible recognizes that inequalities will inevitably arise in a ‘fallen’ society – a realism it shares with the worldview of modern capitalism. Unlike the social Darwinism of the latter, however, the biblical vision refuses to stipulate that injustice is therefore a permanent condition.”

It is Sabbath Economics, then, which provides us with a set of tools for building the roadway. As promised, I want to suggest some of the specific tools to be found in the Sabbath Economics toolkit. These particular six were devised by Bartemeous Cooperative Ministries and are called the Sabbath Covenant: 1. Donate part or all of our surplus capital to the poor. Make investments socially responsible. Invest in community development financial institutions; 2. Minimize, and when possible eliminate, personal debt; 3. Attune to the natural environment’s rhythm; 4. Simplify life; 5. Engage with the poor in solidarity rather charity; 6. Honor the Sabbath, especially as a discipline of living justly.

This is not, however, a program that is simple or that can be grafted into a life that is not rooted in community. Like all “programs” which require much of us, I think particularly of the 12-step programs, we can not do it alone. I want to close with a note of hope, a note that demonstrates that the Kingdom of God is not as far off as we might think, and that it is within our grasp, if we can but listen and learn.

Of recent, I have been describing the micro-enterprise projects which RSWR supports as laboratories of Sabbath Economics. To the extent that this is true, and I think it is very true, they serve as models for us to examine, learn from, be moved by, and emulated. Let me close by lifting up some of the specific actions and dynamics that we find in these group. Let us listen and learn.

A self-help group is 12-20 women (there are now a few men’s self-help groups) living in the same community. These groups are formed for the purposes of mutual support, creation and use of a mutually-held loan fund, mutual accountability, discussion about and action taken on common problems. I want to close this morning with a few scenarios which demonstrate not just the value of these self-help groups to their members, but the values they demonstrate to us, especially related to Sabbath Economics.

A. One member of the group reports that her husband has been beating her. A committee of five from her group agrees to go to her husband and tell him to stop. He

refused. The group then goes to the next meeting of the women's federation, which appoints another committee of five. These women go to the police and village leader asking that they tell the husband to stop. This was done, and he stopped. The Jubilee is community action taken to redress individual misdeeds.

B. There is only enough savings in the group fund to make loans to three of the members so they can start their own income-generating businesses, who will get the loans. After some discussion, the women agreed that the poorest three of them, most probably widows, would get the loans.

C. One of the women who got a loan became sick, could not work, and could not make her loan payments. The other women in the group decided to take turns operating her business, continuing her family income, and maintaining the loan payment back to the group.

Finally, an example we heard Friday from our fundraising consultant. He asked how many of us would be willing to give \$100,000 to RSWR, or some other organization. No hands were raised. He then asked how many of us had children and how many of us would get \$100,000 to pay for a surgery to save our child's life. All hands went up. This is Sabbath Economics.

There is, finally, one particularly valuable means by which we can measure our participation in Sabbath Economics, the Great Economy, or the little economy in which we most often live. That measure is the question, "How much love is released?" My prayer is that we continually seek to order our individual and corporate lives in such a way that they increasingly release love.