

*Based on John 12:1-8. Anointing Jesus at Bethany*

Seven months ago, all the way back in September, the Jewish tradition began a year-long sabbatical, called *Shmita* in Hebrew. You may remember we spent several months in worship last autumn reflecting on three themes of *Shmita*: work, wealth, and land.

To recap: the biblical tradition establishes the sabbatical year as something of an economic reset button for the entire society. All workers everywhere are given an entire year off. Can you imagine! An entire year of rest, knowing you will get your job back at the end of the year. Indentured servants are freed from their economic slavery. Debts are forgiven. Private land holdings are released to the commons. Food is distributed freely and fairly for everyone. A great big party ensues!

The point of the sabbatical year, in a nutshell, is pretty simple: to keep people from becoming poor in the way the Israelites are before God liberates them from economic slavery in Egypt. Biblical ethicists today call this Covenant Economics.

Yes, the biblical tradition of Covenant Economics acknowledges, over time *life happens*, even when we are all at our best, and especially when we are not. Over time, the tradition acknowledges, some people simply produce more than others through their work and end up reaping the benefits. And over time, the tradition admits, some people simply cannot keep from hoarding - either out of fear or out of greed - and their hoarding keeps others from having enough. It is just the way things are. Which means, as Jesus says in our Lesson for today, *The poor are always with you*.

Left to our own devices, the biblical tradition of Covenant Economics confesses, we who are human inevitably skew abundant life in the land of promise and plenty given to us by God toward *the haves* and away from *the have nots*. But! The sabbatical year, the *Shmita*, the year in which we find ourselves this very moment 2022, ensures that the skewed experience of life abundant can only go so far. Every seven years, the system of Covenant Economics insists, the entire society hits the economic reset button. Everyone gets a clean slate. Therefore, as the Deuteronomist tells us, every seven years, *there need be no poor people among you ... if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands* (Ch. 15:4-5).

So, it turns out, there really is a way to end poverty as we know it. So why are we still here? With the poor always with us. With the poor, in some cases, *being* us.

The answer, in a nutshell, is also pretty simple. Humanity writ large - not necessarily you and me as individuals, but the entire human species - has collectively refused to follow *Shmita*. And for understandable reasons. We - and by *we* I mean those of us, including myself, for whom the system of *non-Covenant Economics* is working out reasonably well, thank you very much - do not want to hit the reset button. We have pensions, after all. 401(k)s we have worked hard to build up. Hitting reset in order to provide for the low-wage workers whose labor enlarges our 401(k)s is, in theory, a great idea, but which one of us will be the first to put it into practice?

Believe me, I get it. It is far easier to follow in the footsteps of Judas and fling a coin to a beggar, patting ourselves on the back for the good charity of it all.

Turns out, that is not what Jesus really wants, at least not in our Lesson for today. What Jesus really wants is *Shmita: a restructured edifice that produces no beggars* in the first place (Theoharis, *Always with Us? What Jesus Really Said about the Poor*, 124).

Which leads us to the party at the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus in our Lesson for today, where the One upon whom the Spirit of the Lord has descended, in the words of Luke's Gospel, to *bring good news to the poor*, is the guest of honor.

Three years now, Jesus has labored, proclaiming to anyone with ears to hear and eyes to see and, in our Lesson for today, with noses to smell the fragrance, The Sabbatical Year to end all sabbatical years. Three years now, Jesus has labored, building, in the words of Liz Theoharis, co-chair of the modern day Poor People's Campaign, *a social movement of the poor that practice[s] and preache[s] about God's coming reign of abundance, dignity, and prosperity for all* (144). Three years now, Jesus has labored, insisting that, again in the words of Theoharis, *In God's Kingdom*, a kingdom, as we have sung, *IS justice and peace, there will be no poor because poverty ... will not exist* (74).

Now, in our Lesson, in a culmination of the entire ministry of Jesus, as he prepares to confront the powers that be in Jerusalem - the powers that are most committed to *non-Covenantal Economics*, the dinner party at the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus becomes a ritual re-enactment of the vision of *Shmita* Jesus has been proclaiming all along: a deep rest from their labors; an extravagant anointing; a eucharistic feast (with a first century woman presiding!); food distributed freely and fairly to all; a heavenly banquet, with sweet nectar wafting through the air. Enough, truly, for everyone.

The invitation for us, as we engage in our own ritual re-enactment of *Shmita* at the table, is to claim this vision now for our ministry today, especially in this modern day Sabbatical Year. Our own ritual re-enactment of *Shmita* at the table confirms our calling as a congregation to a Radical Hospitality in The Way of Jesus that eradicates systemic poverty altogether. Our ritual re-enactment of *Shmita* at the table confirms our anointing as a congregation to a Holistic Spirituality in The Way of Jesus that insists every act of charity we practice must be equally rooted in the pursuit of justice. Our ritual re-enactment of *Shmita* at the table confirms our commitment as a congregation to an Engaged Compassion in The Way of Jesus that lavishes love on the living, even while we fight like hell for the dying.

Through our ritual re-enactment of *Shmita*, in this sabbatical year, we will confirm our calling, our anointing, and our commitment, with the words of the resurrected Jesus encouraging us, in the paradox of spiritual wisdom, saying gently to us: *Beloved, I am with you always, even until the end of the age.*

Let the church say, Amen!