

Jesus' Social Structure, God's Economy

It sometimes amazes me how good we are at picking and choosing what we want to read and create as images to use for ourselves from our scriptures. This is especially true when it comes to the messages found in scriptures about how we as human beings organize our ways of living together in community. We keep repeating the same patterns for building communities. We keep ignoring what scripture tells us is God's opinion...judgment about those patterns, the interactions and judgments we make about each other as they develop. Perhaps that is one of the reasons that the 8th century prophets are often not well studied, and when they are used or read, their words are kept in the ancient past. Their words are usually not brought into the context of our world where the parallels are actually very striking. The prophets were speaking God's word to the elites of their time...to those doing well in either Israel or Judah or both. They addressed those who were doing well at the expense of the many that were poor and suffering because of the actions; the self-centeredness of the elites. These reprimands came because the structures created within the covenant for the people to follow had been broken. There was a lectionary reading for today from the prophet Jeremiah who spoke God's word to the elite and was shamed and humiliated for it by those in power...not so differently from what often happens today. He proclaimed the coming Babylonian invasion of Judah as God's judgment and encouraged the people to submit to God's judgement. He paid a high price for such preaching. Jeremiah is now known as the "weeping prophet" as he gave voice to the trauma, suffering and loss of his experiences...his and that of his people. Within Jeremiah's words of lament there is also an expression of the grief felt by God over the covenant made with humanity being broken. Each party is working through their own grief in those texts...and what is important for us to remember that the covenant itself survives. Although the covenant is broken by people...God's presence remains with them. As we observe the broken nature of our world, perhaps we could gain a great deal from remembering and considering these things. We have been moving through what is known as the Letter from James in our scriptures, but that text was more likely a copy of an early Christian sermon or what was called an exhortation to an assembly of believers by their leader. In it we find a leader who was disheartened by behaviors he was seeing among them. In the passage today, James describes a community that practices jealousy and resentment as shown in verses 14 and 15: "if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth, such wisdom does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual and devilish." James points out holding to these behaviors are false to the teachings and claims made by members of the community to be followers of Christ. They have no place in the community there. Continuing James declares the results are "for where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind." James sees that the causes of problems within his assembly are rooted in these things. Verse 4:1-3—"Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and you do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures." Now, I think that some of these connections made here are a bit extreme...at least for most of the folks I know...although if you watch the news these days there seem to be

many examples of folks who seeing something they want are perfectly willing to commit murder to obtain it...but the point made here is valid for most of us on a less extreme level. We all do tend to see things which we covet...things which we do not necessarily need, but which we really do want...and sometimes this desire causes us to do things which strain our relationships with others...sometimes it just makes us envy them...which distorts our ability to have compassion. Even if these feeling do not actually lead to conflicts or disputes...they certainly do not strengthen the bonds of community which we should feel...the feeling that we are one community with one goal...to serve and witness to the One Lord. The things that James is addressing are related to what is evidence throughout scripture, there are two ways of life—the Lord’s way and that other way...the way of the world. Most of the time, Christians live both in the world and in the community of faith...that is inevitable; this passage asks us to consider where our loyalties lie, and how we know...by raising the symbols of status and prestige, of what things are highest on our wish list...what are the things we most desire...and how do we use the gifts we are given. James is convinced that the solution to the situation of envy lies within because the people are “asking wrongly”...they are seeking things for their own pleasures. This is an argument is based on an economic illustration: the scarcity of desired goods leads to an increase in demand for them, and increased demand leads to disregard for the welfare of other persons, even to the extent of war. As any economist or historian knows this pattern can be shown in many times and places throughout the course of civilization. One way to solve the economic problem is to increase the supply; but that often does not work. To ask God for what we need is often futile unless we remove ourselves from the economic way of thinking altogether, because often what occurs in the world is an increase in the supply just creates a greater demand as greed grows. What needs to occur is to remove this way of constant application of the economic approach to satisfying ourselves...to constantly seeking our own pleasures instead of seeking to live into the vision of community which was God’s plan. The passage from James ends with “Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.” Although, the last portion of verse 8 was not included, it seems appropriate: James called his folks: “you double minded.” Folks who wanted to live in the way shown by Jesus’ teaching but had trouble giving up the ways of the world which surrounded them. Walter Brueggemann, a modern day theologian whose writing I enjoy, speaks of this contrast between God’s proclamations and the worlds as the difference between a world view of abundance and scarcity. The world view of all things is that they are in a limited supply and that you must strive for your “self” to have all that you want and desire—to get your share. Sound familiar; sound like the root of what James is describing; sound like our current world? The world view proclaimed by God, the one spoken of where the desert is blooming, where manna and quail appear daily, where grace and mercy are freely available is one of abundance....it is the one which Jesus describes as being near in the reign of God...it is the one where we care for one another...In the narrative given to us in Mark Jesus arrives proclaiming God’s reign has come near, he calls for repentance. He heals diseases and disabilities and forgives sins. Throughout his ministry, he associates with the last and the least in society...gentile women, bleeding women, lepers, raging demoniacs, tax collectors and other notorious sinners. He even welcomes and makes time for little children, much to his disciples dismay for they had absolutely no value or standing in the culture of the day. When Jesus begins teaching his disciples what will happen to him, the course that he is following is the reason that he will be

condemned by those in authority. He has challenged the world's view of how things should be. Jesus dies because he associates with the impure and the worst of sinners and declares that they are forgiven. Jesus dies because the religious establishment cannot tolerate the radical and abundant grace of God that Jesus proclaims and lives. The radical grace of God, the economy that God's reign would establish completely obliterates the world's notions of greatness based on status, wealth, achievement, and all the other marks that we have established to rank ourselves and others. Perhaps that is one reason we resist grace so much. It is much more appealing to be great on the world's terms than on Jesus' terms. Greatness on Jesus' terms means being humble, lowly and vulnerable as a child. Greatness on Jesus' terms is risky; it can even get a person killed. But as Jesus teaches repeatedly, his way of greatness is also the path of life, of true abundance. When Jesus again told his disciples where his chosen path would lead they were evidently away from Capernaum; they were in denial and Mark in today's passage tells us they were afraid to question him. Instead, as they had been walking along they got into an argument...based on things perhaps like the ones James had observed in his assembly...ambition or envy. When they got back to Capernaum, Jesus gathered them together and asked them about their arguments; they did not explain, but he then gave them this teaching: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." In other words, he rejected the world's view of how to order society...they need to do as he has done...they need to keep company with the lowly of life, with the losers, with the ones no one wants to be seen with. If you can see worth and value and loveliness in those very people whom so many others in society overlook due to their own misguided focus on the glitzy and the dazzling and worldly appealing, then you show you have a kingdom perspective, that you are looking through a kingdom lens...and see others as your Lord sees them and you. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.