

The Third Sunday in Lent, Year C, 2022
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Lately it's been hard to escape the topic of money.

Fears over the rise in inflation —

are these higher prices for food and gas and other staples

permanent or just a pandemic- and supply-chain-related

blip?

Conflict in congress over how we're going to pay

for government programs already passed into law

and those politicians are proposing for the future.

Reports of the rising costs of housing and health care and education,

including reports that almost half of American

households are facing serious financial problems.¹

And that's *after* billions of dollars were distributed in relief money

since the pandemic began.

Money, it seems, is a human obsession.

No matter how much we might try to moderate our fixation on it

¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/10/12/1044475441/npr-poll-the-delta-surge-pushed-americans-further-behind-in-all-walks-of-life>

or our anxiety about it, an awareness of money —
whether it's how well our money is making money
or how little money is in our bank account —
runs in the backgrounds of our minds like ambient noise.
Until something breaks through the noise and makes us think again,
not just about money, but about our relationship with it.

The author and philanthropic critic Edgar Villanueva writes

“Money is a tool to reflect the obligations
people develop to one another as they interact.”²

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to reflect the obligations people develop to one another
as they interact.

Let's unpack that.

Money is a tool — it isn't inherently good or bad, but it is useful,
the way a tool is useful.

² <https://courtney.substack.com/p/money-as-medicine>

Money allows us to do things we wouldn't be able to do without it;
it enables us to acquire things, have experiences,
and support people, businesses, and organizations.

Like a tool, money does not exist on its own —
it's a bit like a hammer that needs a nail.

Money is useful for what it allows us to do or to leverage.

In Villanueva's definition, its use is

to resolve obligations that develop between people.

Makes sense, right?

If I go to a restaurant and order food, an obligation develops
that in exchange for that food I will offer money.

That money pays for the raw materials of my meal
as well as the labor for the people who prepared and served it,
and for a portion of all the other costs
of operating a restaurant.

Which brings us to the final part of Villanueva's definition —
money reflects obligations between people that arise
as they interact.

Our human interactions create the obligations

money is used to satisfy.

Interactions between customers and business owners

or service providers, between buyers and sellers.

Sometimes those interactions are obvious,

when we give cash or a check or a credit card

to the person who has provided us something.

But these days, we often exchange money from a distance —

through an app where we don't see the person

we're giving or receiving money from.

Villanueva's definition reminds us that every financial exchange

represents **human beings** *interacting*.

Money is a tool, and it's a necessary one for navigating human life

and managing our obligations and relationships

to family, friends, and strangers.

This definition might offer us a new way to think about money,

but it maintains an understanding of economics

that makes sense.

Today's words from the prophet Isaiah, on the other hand,

offer us a whole different economic vision.

The original context of this passage is the Babylonian exile,

when God's people spent fifty years as refugees
in the land of their worst enemy.

At the point when the prophet was writing, the return home was in sight.

The political landscape is shifting and it's becoming clear that
someday soon the people will be able to return to their homes.

In this moment, for this people who have experienced
untold struggle and suffering, the prophet paints a vision
of a whole new future — one dominated
not by the shadow of trauma and oppression,
but rather by God's outrageous abundance.³

The passage begins with the Hebrew term “Ho” — a call to attention.

The prophet wants the people to sit up and listen to his words,
to let this vision capture their imaginations.

The prophet begins by addressing “everyone who thirsts” —
and since there isn't a human being who doesn't thirst,
it's clear he's got a big audience in mind.

But the second addressee is “you that have no money.”

That's a little harder for our modern ears to understand,

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18/commentary-on-isaiah-551-5-5>

because our global economy runs on money.

Even the poor have money — just less of it, relatively speaking.

The rise of hard currency was just beginning in the fifth century BCE,

when coins became more common in the imperial economy.⁴

Yet as this transition took place there were many people

who still exchanged goods through a barter system

— a system also built on human interactions and obligations,

and which relied on relationships of trust.

Because of this, most people did not have the money

the prophet references, and we can imagine

they were wary of this new economy —

in the same way some of us might be confused or skeptical

or intrigued by crypto currency.

This is who the prophet addresses,

peasants with little political or economic power.

Isaiah wants them to know they are included in God's abundant,

joyful future — a future in which everyone will be able to

enjoy food that satisfies and delights.

⁴ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-18/commentary-on-isaiah-551-5>

In the first three sentences, the prophet uses twelve imperatives,

inviting the people to participate in this new reality God offers.

Come, come, buy, eat, come, buy, listen,

eat, delight, incline, come, listen.

“Come to the waters...you that have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”

This is a people overwhelmed by hardship and loss,

people who've spent fifty years trying to create a new life

in a foreign land.

Whether wine and milk were considered luxuries or necessities,

the prospect of acquiring them at no cost —

well, that was as unimaginable to our ancestors in exile

as it is to us today to enter Publix or Target or Kroger

and take whatever we wanted off the shelves and

walk out without settling our obligations

through a financial exchange.

The very idea of it is absurd.

And yet...have you heard of mutual aid?

Here in Richmond, Virginia there is an organization devoted

to the concept of mutual aid; it's call MAD RVA
MAD RVA stands for Mutual Aid Distribution Richmond,
an organization that formed in the winter of 2018
to provide those experiencing homelessness
supplies like coats and socks to get through the winter.
During the pandemic, MAD RVA reorganized to help those
impacted the most. Over the last year and a half,
the needs have only grown,
but they are needs that existed long before Covid.

The vision MAD RVA has now is to open a physical store
in which all inventory is available free of charge,
provided through donations and volunteers.
The store will be open to anyone in need,
and people don't have to prove their need, either.
If they say they need it, they can have it.

Yaya Ogaldez, a MAD RVA volunteer, describes the vision this way:

“My dream is to have shelving set up that has a lot of essentials...
canned goods...pasta...cold items...snacks for kids.

A place where people can come and have a bit more
autonomy over their choices.”

Ogaldez envisions this store operating like any other grocery store:

shelves stocked with food and people walking through

making choices about what they want to take

for their families to eat.⁵

The major exception, of course, is that MAD RVA

has removed the obligation part of the equation.

At the MAD RVA store, there will just be buying

but without money.

Human interaction as a response to human need.

Pure grace.

It does sound “mad,” doesn’t it?

And yet, on the cusp of a new future,

this is precisely the vision Isaiah paints.

“Come to the waters” — the source of life and nourishment,

and, for us, the sign and symbol of baptism,

our identity as God’s beloved.

“Come to eat and drink and be filled,” with no obligation to pay.

⁵ <https://vpm.org/news/articles/26139/a-richmond-mutual-aid-group-is-fundraising-to-open-a-free-store>

This, says Isaiah, is what will set the people of God apart —
and this is what will attract new nations and people
to come and see what this God is all about.

I think the prophet knew that we humans are a conscientious bunch, ever attuned to
and wanting to resolve our obligations,
perhaps especially our financial obligations.

We are more comfortable when there is an invoice
with a definite amount that will settle that obligation.

It's easier isn't it, when the term of the obligation are made clear
and when we can resolve the obligation by paying a bill?

We just don't quite know what to do when the church —
or any other organization, for that matter —
says, "You decide what to give" —
even if what you decide is to give nothing.

It almost as if we believe here that the amount of money you have
and the amount of money you give
doesn't change the amount of love God has for you.

I suspect it was just as difficult then as it is for us now
to grasp Isaiah's exhortation to buy wine and milk without money,

to receive God's love and care with no obligation in return.

Then, as now, this vision of an abundant future was hard to grasp

because it was so very different from the economy

that runs on concepts of obligations and debts owed,

of value and worth.

But God's economy is indeed altogether different.

The foundation of God's economy is relationships,

relationships that arise through interactions

between people and between people and God.

Isaiah envisions nations running to God's people to be a part

of what they are a part of — which is nothing less

than the flow of God's unconditional love and grace.

For in God's economy, it is love, not money,

that resolves the obligations people develop to one another

as they interact.

The church is where we get to practice living in this mad, absurd economy,

that runs on love, not money.

Jesus made this point many times in many different ways —

it's not about rules or calculations, he kept saying,

it's about love and mercy, freely given, freely received.

Here in the church, we get to practice living in God's economy,

loving with abandon,

giving with no expectation of receiving,

buying without money,

for in God's economy we already have everything we need

because we have each other, human interactions

built on relationships of love and trust.

And underneath it all is the abundant, unaccountable, extraordinary

love of God, and there is always enough to go around.

Amen.

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