

## **“God’s Economy”**

*Reading: Isaiah 55:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

One of the catchphrases that came out of Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign is, “It’s the economy, stupid.” It’s a phrase that has gotten a lot of mileage in the intervening years. Whatever opinions you may have about Bill Clinton, he was certainly right in pointing out the importance of the economy. I’ve seen it argued that one of the most important factors in both a president’s popularity and how they’re judged by history is the state of the economy during their administration. When things are going well, people like their leadership; when things are down, whoever’s at the top often takes the blame. A good portion of our daily news cycle is taken up by analyzing the state of the economy. The economy is a big deal; people care about it because it can affect their lives.

A lot of our world can be boiled down to money. Our economy is based on money, which used to be backed by precious metals like gold and silver. Now it’s not; it’s fiat currency, which means that it has value because everyone agrees that it has value. Nowadays we often don’t even bother with actual paper money or coins, and instead we purchase things with nothing but numbers on a computer. But really, what we’re dealing with is time and skill: you put some of your time into making something or doing something, and someone else gives you money for it of some equivalence to what you’ve done. It’s almost like you’re converting parts of your life into a currency that lets you purchase parts of other peoples’ lives. And so we take money and the things we buy with it very seriously, because it’s part of making a living. We even talk about how much someone is “worth,” in the sense of how much money they make and have and how much their assets are worth, as though that’s really a meaningful evaluation of a life.

We care about economics, to a greater or lesser degree, because we care about making a living. We care about things like providing for our families, and having enough food and clothes, and having decent housing, and living a comfortable life. Some people care about power and wealth for their own sakes, and their living is tied up with getting ahead and being better than other people. Our world operates on money and the power it brings.

But today we come to a very familiar story from the life of Jesus that pretty powerfully demonstrates that the economy in God’s kingdom operates very differently than the economy of our kingdoms. The economy in our world uses money to make a living, however you want to define making a living. The economy in God’s kingdom uses God’s grace and power, and it forces us to ask what living really means. Our world tells us that making a living means getting more money, being able to buy what you want, being rich or comfortable or powerful or happy or whatever you value; you need to spend your life accumulating something else of value. The kingdom of God asks us what it really means to live; is there something of greater value for you to spend your life on?

All four of the gospels include this story of the feeding of the five thousand. They don’t all tell it in exactly the same way, and they don’t all tell it at the same point in Jesus’ ministry; ancient authors often weren’t as concerned with strict chronology as modern audiences are. But there’s a lot in this story that reveals the economy of God’s kingdom to us. It’s important to having a full understanding of what exactly Jesus was preaching and how we’re called to respond. It gives us a glimpse of what life is really for; this is life far beyond simply making a living.

Several of the gospels tell this story just after telling about the beheading of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin who set the stage for Him in many ways. Jesus and John had very similar messages from the start: repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. In fact, there was some debate at various points whether John, this apocalyptic-looking figure who lived in the desert and ate wild things, was actually the messiah himself. Eventually John's message of repentance rubbed the wrong person the wrong way, and he found himself in the king's prison. Matthew then tells us about how King Herod's wife then plots John's death by sending her daughter to dance for Herod's guests at a party, and after the dance she convinces him to give her anything she asks for. She asks for John's head on a platter in revenge of John's meddlesome preaching. Word reaches Jesus about His cousin's death, and Matthew tells us that the news affects Him so much that He tries to withdraw from the crowds to be alone. Maybe a couple of things were going through Jesus' mind. Maybe He was thinking how pointless and vindictive John's death was, that He could die at the selfish whims of one spiteful woman. Maybe He was also thinking about how similar His own message was to what John had preached, and the reality of the cross before Him was becoming more real. John preached the coming of the kingdom of God, and he was senselessly killed by people with too much power; Jesus preached the same thing, so what would happen to Him?

So the setting for this classic miracle is Jesus at a low point in His ministry. He's not looking to amaze anyone today, He's not intending to write a story for the ages, He's just mourning the death of His cousin and reflecting on what it all means. But Jesus arrives at what He expects will be a solitary place and finds that the crowds have already gotten there, and Matthew tells us that Jesus "had compassion on them and healed their sick." The economy of God's kingdom operates when compassion meets a need, and the reality is that we will often find the needs seeking us out when we are not looking for them. That's just how life works sometimes.

Jesus serves out of His own poverty of spirit in this moment because He cares about the people He encounters and He cares about their needs. They come for healing, and I assume there was probably some preaching involved, too. But the day wears on and everyone's getting hungry, and Jesus' disciples raise a very valid organizational point: there's not enough food in this remote area to feed the massive crowds of people. Jesus' response is, of course, apparently absurd: "The crowds do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." In His time of compassion flowing out of His own poverty of spirit, Jesus then turns the expectation for compassion on His followers in their own poverty of means. How can they possibly make even a small difference to such a crowd? Thousands of people, and only five loaves of bread and two fish? The issue is not a lack of compassion or desire to meet the needs, the issue is a lack of means.

It's an economic question. Where do we get the funds and the resources to feed these people? But Jesus is operating in God's economy, and the miraculous happens. He takes what resources they offer, meager though they are; He blesses them, breaks them, and hands them to His disciples. Bread and meat multiply inexplicably, and the multitudes of people are satisfied with leftovers to spare. Human need and poverty of spirit meet with the compassionate grace of God flowing through God's willing people, and miraculous things abound. It cannot be explained according to the economics of our world. It's an axiom that there ain't no such thing as a free lunch; that's true in the physical world as well as the economic world. You cannot get something without expending some sort of work or energy or money or waste. But God operates on a different economy.

Where God's kingdom is working, God loves to provide. Jesus feeding the multitudes of hungry people in a solitary place with miraculous bread is an echo, or maybe a fulfillment, of God feeding the multitudes of hungry people in the solitary places around Mount Sinai many generations before. They, too, had gathered to be set free by God and to hear His word proclaimed. God had rescued them from slavery and had taken them into the wilderness to teach them how to live with Him as their king, and they raised the same basic question as Jesus' disciples, though they were less diplomatic. Where can so many people find enough food? And for forty years, God provides them with daily manna, miraculous food. Though Jesus is doing it on a different scale, He's showing His followers that God's kingdom still operates on that same economy, and that where God is honored, needs are met. Jesus is showing them that the kingdom has arrived with Him.

What this means is that the kingdom of God is good news for those in need, because God can meet their needs, even in miraculous ways. We have stories here today of people who have seen God do incredible things. The first sermon of Jesus in Luke's gospel begins this way: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor." Nowadays in our focus on how the gospel saves us from the spiritual impact of our sin, we often overlook the practical ways that the gospel of Jesus involves meeting peoples' physical needs. He heals and feeds as much as He forgives and teaches. Where the Spirit is at work, the kingdom breaks in. The heavenly feast is prepared, and we can have a taste of it beforehand. Some of the food on the table may not be what we expect, but it's well-provisioned. We don't always know what we really need, but God does. What He gives us is what we truly need, and as He gives us more of Himself we realize that He is our deepest need. And what He doesn't give us, He will give us when His kingdom arrives in its fullness.

At the same time, the kingdom of God is good news for those who are *not* in need, because the coming of the kingdom shows us how little we actually have, and we are invited to generous compassion and reliance on God. Jesus' disciples weren't the ones with the need; it was the crowds. John's telling of the story says that it was a boy who had the bread and fish; he was pretty well packed for his dinner. But Jesus invites them to bring what they have, and what appeared to be enough for them is revealed to be paltry in comparison to the needs around them, and their generous compassion meets with God's generous power to do miraculous things. You may not think you have great need, but when you enter the kingdom of God, you are asked what it means to live, and your priorities are evaluated, and it is revealed that you don't have as much as you thought.

Of course, as most of you probably know, this episode in Jesus' life is what has inspired our work at Five Loaf House. We want to be motivated by the compassion of God to share the good news of the kingdom, the news that as we are generous with what little we have, Jesus will take it, bless it, break it, and give it back to us miraculously multiplied for the meeting of the needs around us. And this is a sign of the kingdom of God, that Jesus is Lord, that He is alive, and that He is at work in this world. The work we've done has brought us to the point that most of the main floor of the building is finished, and the ecumenical food pantry has already had two successful food distributions from Five Loaf House. As we settle in, we'll add more ways of serving the needs in our community. We're in the process of raising funds for windows and siding on the second floor, which we need to seal up any leaks before winter. After that will come the renovation of the second floor to offer housing for those in need.

We are trusting in Jesus Christ, looking back on the time when He multiplied five loaves to feed five thousand and asking the bold question, “What if God’s economy still works like this?” The prophet Isaiah beautifully proclaimed the promise of the kingdom: “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.” And as we place our lives before Jesus, we learn that His presence supplies all our needs, and He invites us to be generous in return.

Benediction: Jesus said, “The crowds do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.” Go to generously and compassionately proclaim that Jesus is Lord.



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