

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In January, I had the opportunity to participate in a few days of continuing education at Eastern Mennonite Seminary on the EMU campus. I was very excited to get to attend this event, because the keynote speaker was one of the preeminent Old Testament scholars of our day, the Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann, whom I have heard before. It was an enlightening event, and I wanted to share a little bit of it with you.

The theme for the event was “God and Mammon: Reframing Stewardship Amidst Abundance, Scarcity, and Conflict.” Dr. Brueggemann’s keynote lectures were entitled, “Conflict from Above: The Drive for Accumulation,” “Conflict from Below: The Possibility of Astonished Gratitude,” and “Sabbath as a Means of Transition from Anxious Scarcity to Grateful Abundance.” I want to present my notes from the first lecture here, and the following two lectures in the March and April newsletters.

In the first lecture, “Conflict from Above,” we examined Genesis and Exodus. In Exodus we read that the Hebrews are enslaved, but we seldom ask how they got into slavery. In Genesis 47, we find the answer. It is all about food and leveraging food resources. Pharaoh takes on a lot of the food anxiety. He is anxious because those who have the most have the most anxiety over not having enough. He has dreams (nightmares!) about it. Nightmares are not a good basis for economic policy.

Then, Pharaoh appoints a food czar (Joseph). As the famine worsens, the Egyptians and the Hebrews sell their livestock in order to get food. We all know this is an unsustainable economic model because if you take a peasant’s cattle he’s out of business! But at no point does it ever occur to anyone to give food away in this time of crisis. Instead, crisis becomes an opportunity for exploitation. Eventually Egyptians and Hebrews and other nations sell their land and their own bodies, in exchange for food. It is a huge pyramid plan benefiting those at the top. All the wealth trickled up to Pharaoh! Pharaoh becomes the embodiment of the “narrative of accumulation.” Pharaoh becomes the biblical model of the greedy, hard-hearted person.

In the narrative of accumulation, gold gets you seated higher. Those who have are more important than those who have-not. Solomon, despite his wisdom, is enticed by this narrative of accumulation. Pharaoh was his father-in-law, after all! In I Kings 4:7-19 we read about all his tax districts, and the meat they can afford to eat. Solomon manages to accumulate 300 trophy wives, plus concubines, and they are a part of his undoing. This is Israel’s problem again, and not just Egypt’s. No surprise then that the prophets pick up on this them in their preaching. Amos 6:4-6 says, “Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock...but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.” In other words, “Whoa to you who are narcotized by the narrative of accumulation.”

Jeremiah 5 says that this way of managing money is unsustainable. Ezekiel 16 says that the sin of Sodom is that they lived in luxury and affluence and did not care about the poor. In Daniel 5 the handwriting is literally on the wall for the king who worships the

gods of gold, and silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone. Daniel tells him he and his kingdom are at an end. Daniel 5:23b “You have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know; but the God in whose power is your very breath, and to whom belong all your ways, you have not honored.” But King Belshazzar is so caught up in the narrative of accumulation that he cannot see it. He rewards Daniel with what else but a gold medal! He still doesn’t get it. And he dies that very night.

All this narrative of accumulation happened without the benefit of the thousands of commercials and advertisements that the average American is said to be exposed to every day. The messages that tell us, “You will be all right if you just buy this, but you are not all right now.” “You are lacking. You are deficient.”

The idea of God’s lavish grace, of goodness and mercy, of generosity make no sense if you live in this narrative of accumulation. But it is not the only narrative. Mary sings her Magnificat – a new alternate narrative about the God who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty. The Rich Fool in Luke 12:13-21 celebrates alone, because monopoly breeds isolation. He was as hard hearted as Pharaoh, building his own barns and never thinking of giving any of his extra grain away! And a few verses later Jesus echoes the irony of Solomon’s narrative of accumulation when he says that even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these lilies of the field. It is the Lord who will provide. Jesus is so firmly planted in the narrative of abundance that he can identify the systemic evils as easily as the individual ones.

We, as church people, tend to be good charitable givers who don’t understand the systemic evils that are at work in the economies we participate in. One philosopher said to follow the money if you want to see what people value. The narrative of accumulation is a fetish and idolatry that demands our loyalty and promises to make us safe but it does not and cannot.

In contrast is the story of God’s abundance, which is the topic of lecture number 2, next month. Also, if you are interested in hearing the lectures, EMU has made them available on their website as audio files. Simply surf to www.emu.edu/seminary.

Peace,
Pastor Chris