

September 4, 2025

Rev. Lisa Schrott

Deuteronomy 8:11-18 & Matthew 5:23-24

The Economics of Justice: Living in Covenantal Community

We are in the third week of our worship series exploring the economics of justice. The past two weeks we have focused on how our sinfulness as individuals and as a society contributes to economic injustice through the behaviors of envy, coveting, idolatry and greed. This morning we are going to take a turn and consider the positive ways we can live as a people to promote economic justice through living in covenantal community. You just heard Patty read one way that occurs – through remembering the covenant God made with the Hebrew people as they wandered in the wilderness after being freed from slavery.

Our New Testament passage this morning a small piece of the larger Sermon on the Mount, the first of five sermons that Jesus delivers to the disciples and the crowds who follow him. The Sermon on the Mount begins in Chapter 5 with the Beatitudes, the “Blessed are..” statements and continues through Chapter 7 with teachings of what it means to be a people of God. The teachings center on how we are to be in relationship with God and with each other – you can think of this part of scripture as fleshing out the covenant God made with the people in the Ten Commandments. Our scripture this morning comes from a section on how we respond when a relationship is broken. Hear now these words from Matthew 5:23-24

Jesus said, “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your sibling, and then come and offer your gift.” **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

I’m a bit of a bird nerd – well a bird nerd in the making. Recently I’ve been charmed and challenged by Christian Cooper’s memoir, *Better Living Through Birding: Notes From a Black Man in the Natural World*. This is the One Great Read book for the greater Lansing area this summer and I am excited to hear the author speak in a few weeks. So it is probably not a big surprise that thrust of my sermon this week was influenced by an article I read on NPR’s website about how birds build community and culture. In a series of elegant experiments (or at least elegant to this non-ornithologist), researchers studying white-browed sparrow weavers found, that just like humans, these birds have cultural traditions that affect the architecture of their communities, in particular of their housing – their nests.

We have this picture in our brains – or at least I did – of a bird picking up a single piece of straw or a twig and carrying it to little nest it is building. An individual labor of love. And some birds do build nests that way. However, white-browed sparrow weavers create nests communally, with multiple family members, as well as “friends” joining in to help. Well, “friend” may be a little anthropomorphizing, they are join by non-genetically related birds who are

adopted into the family. These extended families create nests that are distinct and unique, different from the neighbors of the same species that might live just yards apart in the same environs. The pattern of the nests is not passed down through genetic relatedness, rather it is passed from generation to generation through social learning. These birds not only learn from their past experiences, improving on design aspects if something fails, they also learn from each other and can adapt their methods based upon what they see their neighbors doing.

The senior author of the paper published in *Science* that describes this nest building behavior, Dr. Maria Cristina Tello-Ramos concludes: “The finding suggests that when people look up and see a nest in a tree, it might not be the product of innate behavior alone. It might be that we're seeing a tradition.” The researchers concluded that birds’ nests should be interpreted and appreciated not just for their functional nature, but also for their expression of shared culture.¹

Tradition. Shared culture. Social learning. Words that don’t often come to mind when we think about birds. Words that do, however, come to mind when we think about the ways we are called to live as a community of faith. What Moses and Jesus aimed to do with their words.

The Old Testament book of Deuteronomy is the fifth and final book of the Pentateuch - the traditional Jewish grouping of the five books that form the Torah, or the law. Deuteronomy is a Greek word that means “the second law” or the “repetition of the law.” The Hebrew title for this book is *Devarim* which means “words,” which in some ways is a bit more fitting to me, for Deuteronomy consists of a series of speeches given by Moses. The first speech details Israel’s history of wandering in the wilderness following the receipt of the Ten Commandments. This speech is given just before the Hebrew people are about to enter Canaan. The journey from slavery to freedom is about to be realized and it is helpful to know where you have been, before you take the next steps. The scripture Patty read is from Moses’ second speech, which is focused on the importance of worshiping the Lord God and following the laws - the teachings - that the Lord God has conveyed through Moses.

These *devarim* – these words - tell the promise of the law, the covenant, that will shape the Hebrew people, giving them a common identity and way of life – loving God and loving neighbor. Throughout these words there is a constant theme of God’s abiding presence. Part of the challenge for the Israelites was understanding that as God’s people – as the people claimed by God through the covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, as the people freed from slavery by a new kind of leader called by God, that as God’s people they had a new identity. Forging this new identity was not instantaneous, and as they journey into Canaan they need to release aspects of the past and reshape their understanding of who

¹ Nell Greenfieldboyce. When birds build nests, they're also building a culture. *National Public Radio* online at <https://www.npr.org/2024/08/29/nx-s1-5090967/birds-build-nests-tradition-culture-architecture>; Maria Cristina Tello-Ramos et al. Architectural traditions in the structures built by cooperative weaver birds. *Science*. 29 Aug 2024 Vol 385, Issue 6712 pp. 1004-1009; <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.adn2573>

they are – reshape their concept of self-reliance – reshape their concept of God, moving away from practices to appease an angry God to practices that offer gratitude for God's blessings and gifts. And practices that promote a shared life, like not coveting and not being envious and greedy.

I think about the process of forming community as having four steps: first the identity step – understanding that you are a child of God; second recognizing that those accompanying you on this journey are also children of God who bring different gifts to the community, something to be celebrated. The third and fourth steps require commitment to the community, a sense of belonging. They ask you to discern who we are together, how we care for one another. And they ask us to consider what we are called to do to promote a just world.

This is where we find Jesus this morning as he preaches the Sermon on the Mount. Just prior to the verses we heard, Jesus tells the crowd gathered that he has not come to abolish the law or contradict the teaching of the prophets. He has come instead to fulfill them. And that is a harder road to follow. It goes beyond simply following the commandments to not covet or steal or murder. Jesus tells the crowd:

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

This is the hard work of life in a covenantal community. At its core, living in covenantal community is the recognition that we are bound together by promises we make to God and to each other. This is the basis of the Covenant of Sinai – otherwise known as the Ten Commandments. Four of the commandments are directed toward promises we make toward God and six commandments are directed toward how we treat our neighbors. When the Hebrew people finally crossed the Jordan River over to Canaan, now led by Joshua after Moses' death, Joshua reminded the people to make themselves holy – to sanctify themselves – so that they would remember God's presence with them. Years of wandering and struggle, years of not knowing what would come next, years of sharing in their common life together – of births and deaths and glorious desert sunrises and sunsets that took their breath away, hugs and tears, hunger, thirst and the gift of sweet water and manna – the bread of life that sustained them. They entered Canaan as a community.

“No one gets through life alone. It's true that we all need a village.” This quote is from Kate Bowler, a you may remember her name from one of the devotionals we used during the Lenten season. Bowler is the author of the wonderful book *Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I've Loved)*, which she spun into a thought-provoking podcast interviewing

famous and not-so-famous interesting people. Earlier this year, Bowler had a delightful series of social media posts on How to Be a Village. If you are on social media, I'll share them to the church's FB and Insta accounts this coming week. Included in her advice on how to be a village were such things as *Host a Thank You Party* for the people who showed up when you needed it most; *Keep a Running Check-in List* of the people you know that are carrying a heavy load; and my favorite, *Be the Fun Bringer* – be the one to create the vibe you want because joy counts as care. Sometimes what people need is a reason to laugh for a minute.² I love these reminders that being the village – being the community - for each other can include simple actions that nurture relationships. It is an important rejoinder to the harder work of being in community that Jesus calls us to in Matthew - being reconciled to each other. Admitting when we are wrong and asking for forgiveness. Granting forgiveness when someone acknowledges that they have done harm, when they have broken one of our covenantal promises and is contrite and asks for forgiveness.

At the end of the day, the promises that we make to God and the promises we make to each other are the antidote to injustice. How do love your neighbor as yourself? Yes, it is not coveting their belongings or stealing from them or lying to them. It goes beyond that. It is making sure that they have food to eat. It is examining the systemic issues that underlie poverty. It is to do as the words attributed to Archbishop Desmond Tutu state, "There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in."³

And yes, living in covenantal community is not murdering people. But it is also more than that. It is seeking reconciliation – seeking to make right – those behaviors on an individual and societal level that have caused harm to your neighbors. To promote economic justice for all, even if it means there might be less for me. It is to move away from thinking about what's only in it for me to move toward how can I meet the needs of people who are not me, not necessarily like me, and not part of this congregational community. Living in covenantal community is seeing the face of Christ in each other. It is mourning when our neighbors mourn and rejoicing when they rejoice. It is choosing love and not fear. This is what the Lord is saying through Moses and what Jesus is saying to the crowds. Reject the fear. Reject the anger. Reject the insecurity that leads to coveting and envy. Reject the pride that makes you think that it is was your power and the might of your own hand that gave you wealth. Instead, embrace generosity. Embrace compassion. Embrace sharing so the needs of all are met. Offer welcome, healing, justice and peace to all so that the tables of economic injustice can be overturned. And remember always, that the Lord your God formed you to be a people who live in covenantal community. Join me in prayer.

² <https://www.facebook.com/katecbowler/posts/no-one-gets-through-life-aloneits-true-that-we-all-need-a-village-but-there-will/1240885064074011/>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/DJoi7JznF2/>;
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/everything-happens-with-kate-bowler/id1341076079>

³ Quoted in this article from Time magazine: <https://time.com/6132224/desmond-tutu-bono/>