

TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH – Hartford, CT

*HAVE WE ANYTHING TO EAT? THE CHURCH AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS*

The Reverend Dr. Frank G. Kirkpatrick April 26, 2009 The Third Sunday of Easter, Year B

*Acts 3:12-19 1 John 3:1-7 Luke 24:36b-48*

Jesus looks at the disciples who are staring at him, startled and terrified, and asks the most elemental question any person can ask: “Have you anything here to eat?” That question is being asked today by millions of people around the globe who have become the victims of the implosion of our world-wide economic system. Some people are literally starving to death or having to choose between food and paying their bills. Suicides are not uncommon. As a nation, as a world, we are confronted with one of the most monumental challenges of our life time: how to survive the collapse of the economic institutions on which we built our dreams, many of which have proven to be illusions, that we can have everything we desire without calculating the long-term cost to ourselves and to others.

Now it may not come easily, but in the midst of this crisis we need to think clearly about how we, as Christians, can make a credible contribution to the multiplicity of voices about what we should do to respond to this extraordinary situation in which we are all implicated.

There are, I believe, two fundamental things that we can offer from our tradition to the conversation at this pivotal moment. First, we can remind ourselves and others of some basic human characteristics whose presence in each of us should have warned us about the consequences of entrusting unregulated power to people who are not spiritually or morally mature enough to handle it. And second, we can recall that part of our Christian moral heritage that has in earlier times subjected economic behavior to moral evaluation. Ultimately both contributions rest on our ability to build a humane and just economic system which can realistically answer Jesus’ elemental question for the millions of poor people around the globe: can you give me something to eat? Fortunately, given our vast global interconnectedness, and the potential collective power of our economic institutions, combined with our willingness to use that power wisely, the world’s hungry *can* be fed by a fair, just, and humane global economic system.

The difficulty is that most of us in the Church simply are not economically literate enough to know what the best course of action would be when addressing the *particularities* of the *systemic* nature of our economic problems. We do know something, and this is the first point, about human nature in its fallen condition. We know that even the best of us are still susceptible to greed if the temptation of material reward is high enough and the risk of spiritual bankruptcy to our souls seems small enough. And we have found that the economic system in which we operate, at least in its unregulated form, rests on the premise that unlimited acquisition is everything, greed is good, selfishness is better, and acting only for the short term is best of all. We have allowed our economic system to foster practices that make the common good subordinate to the short-term private good of the most privileged. When I can earn wealth, not by producing a good that serves others but merely by manipulating money in complex ways, if I can pass off the risk I’ve taken in short-term financial dealings onto someone else down the road, then I’ve successfully avoided taking moral responsibility for the long-term consequences of my actions. And

when I participate in an economic system that rewards short-term greed, I am aiding and abetting the devastating effects of the system on those who don't have my opportunities or resources. And we, who have been tutored by a Biblical tradition that identifies the source of immorality in the perniciousness of the human heart, know that when we create a system that gives enormous power to people driven by greed, the effects upon those without power are going to be catastrophic. So we can add our voice to a realistic and not romantically blind understanding of human nature as it manifests itself in our economic behavior.

But our second contribution to the present dilemma is that in God's world all human behavior is the object of moral assessment. We subject the practices of racial and gender discrimination, of war, of personal relationships, and of sexual behavior, to moral critique (not always fairly or consistently, of course). Why then should we not subject our economic behavior to similar moral assessment? Economic transactions are, after all, nothing more than complex forms of human behavior, and we have a moral responsibility to evaluate *all* behavior and change it when it fails the test of moral responsibility. Unfortunately we have been brought up in a culture in which the economic order and its systemic practices are declared to be off-limits to moral evaluation. It is a system, its most zealous advocates claim, that operates like an autonomous engine which needs no moral intervention. In large part because the world of economic systems is dizzyingly complex, when we try to speak as Christians about it from a moral perspective, we are not perceived as having credible answers to detailed questions about the morality of such esoteric things as leveraging, credit default swaps, buyouts, bonuses for retention, stimulus packages versus deficit increases, Keynesian vs. libertarian solutions to market malfunctions, the appropriate balance between incentives to become wealthy by risking one's capital and obligations to use the fruits of one's investments for social purposes, the role of taxation, or the morality of any number of obscure financial instruments and options. It may well be that we should, as informed people of faith, have given as much time to understanding the economic order and subjecting it to moral evaluation as we have to our sexual, racial, and gender practices. Only now are we coming to realize that economic practices, and the institutions which embody them, and which are now imploding into a moral abyss, are, at bottom, *human* practices and *human* institutions and thus vulnerable to sin and corruption.

We need to recall some simple truths here: economic behavior is behavior that determines how we relate to each other through the production, pricing, distribution, and use of material goods. And since material goods are essential for the flourishing of human life (as the resurrected Jesus reminds us when he asks for something to eat), economic practices must necessarily be held up to moral scrutiny.

As the U.S. Roman Catholic bishops and the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church were saying at least 20 years ago, the economic order must be evaluated by clear moral criteria such as: what do economic practices do *for* the fundamental dignity of all persons, especially for the poor who lack economic resources; what do they do to *destroy* the well-being of the poor, and what do they do to *enable* the poor to do for themselves. The economic order, like any other form of human life, is to be judged by how it serves the well-being and flourishing of persons, but especially the poor. And we have many examples in the history of our Church of serving the poor economically: from the earliest church in which all the members brought their goods, laid them at the apostles' feet, and had them distributed to those in need (as our lesson from last Sunday reminds us), to the medieval prohibition on usury (or exorbitant interest charged to the poor), to more contemporary critiques of treating private property as a

sacred fetish, rather than as a gift to share with those who have less. Like the economists and businesses of the world we also have a bottom line, but it's not how much money we've added to our portfolio at the end of the month, it's how much human need has been met by the wealth we have generated. It's not how many things we can acquire, it's how we use the things we have to bring necessary goods to those who most desperately need them. It's not how much food we can afford to buy at fancy restaurants or store in our freezers, it's how many hungry people have been fed at the end of the day.

I believe an economic system can be designed (no matter how difficult this will be) to encourage the best of human abilities to create wealth that can be distributed fairly and humanely to all who have need. But the only way to do that is to remember first, that as human beings, we are likely to use whatever power is granted to us at least in part to satisfy our greed (and therefore we should never allow power to be concentrated in the hands of an economically privileged few operating without regulation); and second, to remember that all human creations can and must be designed and evaluated by how they serve the least of those among us because it is among the poor that the Kingdom of God will first be found.

This present crisis is an opportunity to get back to first principles: to think again about the whole system in which we are implicated and to lift up the moral values that have defined us throughout the ages as the people of God. We have been blinded by short-term greed: now we have the opportunity to think again how to institutionalize and personalize the economy as an instrument for the common human good. In doing so we can, in the light of long-term compassion for all our brothers and sisters around the globe, realistically and justly answer Jesus' question: can you give us something to eat?

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