

All Flourishing is Mutual: Reciprocity

by Pastor Leah Rosso

Psalm 33: 1-11; Luke 12: 13-22

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In her book, *The Serviceberry*, Robin Wall Kimmerer tells the story of a researcher who was in the Brazilian rainforest observing how families and communities related to one another when one of the families he was with was able to kill a sizable animal to eat. There was way too much meat for his own family, and there were many options of ways to dry and store that meat that were well known and used in the area, so the researcher asked the hunter how he was going to store it. The hunter looked at him, puzzled, and said, "Why would I store it?" Instead he sent out an invitation to the community, inviting everyone to come, and soon there were all different generations of people gathered around the fire, eating every last morsel. The researcher felt that this was really maladaptive behavior. What about when there wasn't enough food? What were they going to do then? He expressed some of his concern to the hunter who replied, "I store my meat in the belly of my brother."

"I store my meat in the belly of my brother." What a life giving understanding of investment. The mutual exchange isn't a 1 for 1 trade - I share my apples with you and you give me the same amount of tomatoes. It's a reciprocity that flows through many people, flows through the earth, and keeps flowing from one person, animal, and plant, to the next, and then comes back around, making it possible for everyone to flourish.

Today we are focusing on reciprocity, but before we can even understand this concept as a give and take that is beneficial to all, I feel like we have to recognize that our understanding of it is so often about trading commodities - I give you something and you give me something in return. The American Economic Association defines economy as "the study of scarcity, the study of how people use resources and respond to incentives." Which helps us understand how we've gotten where we are - how we define things matters. And when the very basis of our understanding is grounded in scarcity rather than in abundance, that is what we focus on. Did you know the words, "economy" and "ecology" come from the same root word, a word that means home? How do we take care of our home and find our way home - both economically and ecologically?

In our Gospel story this morning we hear that Jesus' values and understanding of wealth mirrors Kimmerer's understanding - *that wealth is anything that can be shared*. In our Gospel a man asks Jesus to come and tell his brother to divide his inheritance with him. First, Jesus seems to say that it's none of his business! But then Jesus immediately shifts to warning the man about greed. He tells him that this life is not

about gaining possessions. And he tells him this story about a man whose crop did so well one summer that he tore down his barns and built larger ones, telling himself that from now on all he would need to do is sit around eating, drinking, and being merry. But God's response was, "You fool. Tonight you will die, and then who will receive your treasure? So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Would we hear that differently if the word "treasure" wasn't used? How about, so it is with those who store up STUFF for themselves, store up money, when our investments grow beyond what we need, we are called to be rich towards God - to share all that we have.

Both Kimmerer and Jesus agree — wealth can be counted as anything that we *can* share. Ad wealth isn't bad; it's not evil, wealth is a blessing; it's abundance; but what Jesus is saying is that it matters what we choose to do with it. Reciprocity is simply honoring God, honoring the earth, honoring one another in choosing to share what we have so that all can flourish; its recognizing that even what we have isn't really ours, it's just in our hands temporarily so that we can benefit from it and then release it to someone else.

This is the manna economy that God taught to the Israelites in the wilderness — to receive what you need and then to leave the rest for someone else. Jesus says, "life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!

But instead of living into abundance and into a shared existence and into community as Jesus commands us - to love one another - we have often done just the opposite. In the past few years as I have gotten to hear the stories of some of the Dakota people here in Minnesota, as well as when Sarah Augustine shared with us last year at this time, and now in Kimmerer's book, there is a solid pattern not only of how awful our government treated native people, but also of the reasons they gave for doing so. As native people were pushed off of their lands and eventually into reservations, the government declared that the sharing of land and the communal way that people grew their crops within native communities was illegal and proved that they were uncivilized. In US official government documents it specifically says that native families had to divide up their land by family group in order to assimilate to "civilized values of accumulation." These are the values that apparently people thought important. Our economy, based on scarcity, wasn't created that way out of necessity, but out of the very belief that the very best ideal is for each individual to accumulate things for themselves and to work towards a goal of complete self sufficiency. The irony, of course, is that this self sufficiency was based on stealing land from others

and being completely dependent on slave labor. It was not self-sufficiency at all, it was actually that all resources and power flowed from everyone else into the hands of white land owners.

Somehow it doesn't seem like a coincidence to me that the origins of our country have led us to this place where we have a massive housing shortage; a loneliness epidemic; where anxiety and depression have become normative; and suicide rates are high. Where a majority of people aren't able to make enough to live into these so-called ideals - because we were never meant to live alone on our little plots of land isolated from one another. We weren't created to spend the majority of time inside where we convince ourselves that we are separate from the earth and from one another. Consider the ravens, Jesus says; consider the lilies; **consider the teachers all around us- follow their lead.**

Do you hear God calling us back to ourselves? Do you hear Jesus warning us about greed and how it corrupts and ruins things rather than being the support we want it to be? How do we begin to take steps towards a reciprocity with the earth and with one another that helps everything flourish? What will it take for us to see that the best investment we can make is in the belly of our siblings, in the roots of the earth, in this place we call home?

Dr Clay Bordley, a pediatrician in Durham, NC, has been working on these ties of reciprocity with the earth. A decade ago, Bordley decided to buy land and wanted to grow vegetables. But when they tested the soil and tried to grow what they had in mind, they found the soil had been stripped of its nutrients over the decades of growing tobacco on the land. One day as he was walking in a woods near his home, he heard the crunch of acorns underfoot and began to get an idea. Coming back with buckets, he collected those acorns and began to grow trees on his property. He partnered with an organization called Keep Durham Beautiful, and slowly but surely added to the trees on his land. He admits that the work is slow - trees don't grow very quickly, and when one thing doesn't work he pivots to another. But over the past ten years he has been able to give away 2,000 trees as he works towards the goal of creating a tree canopy over Durham that will encompass at least half of the city. With that kind of canopy, the trees will help with keeping temperature lower, cleaning the air, absorbing stormwater, sequestering carbon, and making the city more resilient to the kinds of storms and mudslides they have seen with climate change. But Bordley says that the other benefits are just as good - on his 27 acres he has created a kind of oasis with fruit trees of every kind; oaks and maples; and a rim of pine around the edges. Last Christmas when a child he was caring for died in the ER, Bordley says that the trees helped him process the pain of that death and begin to heal. With all of the work that he has put into the land, Bordley knows he's gotten more out of it than he has put in and he is looking for ways to get more people on the land for their own

health benefits. This kind of reciprocity, where resources, time, and energy is given in abundance and received in abundance nurtures the truth that everything is a gift. (Duke Alumni magazine, Spring 2026)

Charles Eisenstein in his book, *Sacred Economics*, says:

“Gifts cement the mystical realization of participation in something greater than oneself which, yet, is not separate from oneself. The axioms of rational self-interest change because the self has expanded to include something of the other.”

I don't know if there's actually a better definition of religion - realizing that we are a part of something so much bigger than ourselves; being rooted in knowing that all of life is a gift; defining ourselves in ways that include one another. Reciprocity; gift economy; community; the sacredness of life. We can say it in a lot of different ways, and all of those ways lead us back home to God, to the earth, and to each other.