

All Flourishing is Mutual: Gift Economy

by Pastor Leah Rosso

Psalm 8; Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-20

April 12, 2026

Every summer my family and I go to a YMCA Camp about 30 minutes north of Ely, right on the edge of the boundary waters. There are a lot of ways to enjoy camp, from canoe rides to hikes to getting ice cream at the camp store; but one of our favorite things to be surprised by, is whether the blueberries are ripe. For those who go to camp every year, there is a certain amount of mystery as to where the best blueberry spot is, and of course depending on the weather, our week in July sometimes hits it just right and we can come back with Nalgene bottles full of berries; and other years we miss it entirely and can't even find the plants that will ripen for other families. And then there was the year that we stayed on the opposite side of camp, far away from blueberries, but found ourselves delighted when all of the bushes along the path were ripe with raspberries. All week long our kids begged to take that path so they could eat their fill along the way.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her book, *The Serviceberry*, begins the book by describing her delight when she finds all kinds of birds feasting on serviceberries. I'd never heard of a service berry before reading the book, but Kimmerer says the Potawatomi name is "Bozakmin," which means "the best." Imagine, she says, "a fruit that tastes like a Blueberry crossed with the satisfying heft of an Apple, a touch of rosewater, and a minuscule crunch of almond-flavored seeds. They taste like nothing a grocery store has to offer: wild, complex with a flavor that your body recognizes as the real food it's been waiting for." "Bozakmin" also has at its ending the word "min" which means gift in Potawatomi, and as she describes feasting on these berries, laughing at the birds of her namesake, robins, that are also feasting until their bellies are stuffed, it's not difficult to understand how they are pure gift.

Have you ever experienced that kind of abundance? As a kid I remember shelling peas with my Grandma on the front porch for what seemed like hours, and though I'm not sure I appreciated it then, I appreciate it immensely now as I see how much our relationship grew in those times of husking corn and snapping green beans. In my family of origin we have funny stories of going to bed with hands burning after we grew way too many jalapeños and didn't have youtube to tell us that you should wear gloves when you dice them for jar upon jar of salsa. I think of my awe as a Minnesotan when I lived in Zimbabwe and got to eat mangos and avocados straight off the trees and realized how different they taste that way rather than after a week's journey across continents. Kimmerer says maybe that's part of why serviceberries taste so good - their carbon footprint is zero. In order to enjoy them, you have to go to them.

How vastly different is the world we have created, in which everything comes to us rather than the life of the nomadic people who used to travel around this area and live by the gifts of the earth. We may feel rather pleased with ourselves that we've created a stable life in which we can eat anything we want at any time - I do love that I can eat avocados in Minnesota. But in changing the earth to fit *our wants*, and not just once in awhile but all of the time, do we even recognize the costs that our children and grandchildren are going to pay?

In the Bible there are two creation stories. In Genesis 1 we have the story where God begins creating, offering light in the darkness and land in the sea of water and then plants and animals and people; and God calls it all good and then decides that the last and final gift will be rest for everyone. In Genesis 2, we see a different version of creation, one in which God creates all of it in a slightly different order, and then invites the human to work with the land and be a companion to the animals. For a long time now this passage has been interpreted in numerous ways that all focus on humans having dominance over creation; but when we stop and read this passage with different eyes, we may see that in fact all of creation is meant to be a gift, and gifts are reciprocal. This story from Genesis 2 points not to a dominance of one creature over another, but rather God's desire for the earth and the creatures to all have relationship with each other that is based on mutual aid and accountability and generosity, with everything working together.

In nature, we can see the cycle of gift economies all over the place once we begin looking. Kimmerer offers one when talking about serviceberries. You can start anywhere in the cycle, of course, but we'll start with the birds eating those berries:

- 1) The birds who have eaten the berries enjoy the nutrients and carbon that strengthen their bodies and poop out the seeds.
- 2) Rain and ground water make the soil soft so the seeds can sink into the soil and then break open.
- 3) The sun offers warmth and what's needed for photosynthesis so that shoots begin to grow from the seeds.
- 4) The shoots grow from rain and sun and as they are able to bloom, the spring flies pollinate the flowers so that berries are possible.
- 5) Come fall the trees offer their leaves to the earth.
- 6) The microbes and invertebrates in the soil eat the leaves and exchange nutrients and energy into making soil.
- 7) And, if humans are involved, the human tends to the trees, perhaps fertilizing or watering in times of drought, and tending to the seedlings so they too can grow. And the cycle begins again.

This is what is called a gift economy. Nothing is wasted; all nutrients, energy, and materials are recycled into something else which is recycled into something else. Each part of creation has time to blossom and time to offer itself for the good of something else, and all flourishing is mutual.

John Wesley used this same kind of concept when he talked about the love we receive from God. In 1John 4:7-8, we are told that love is from God and everyone that loves is also from God. Wesley described it like this - the love we have came from God; so it's not that we work for that love, no, it is already given to us; but as a gift received well, our response is to love God back and the way we do that is to love our neighbor and love the earth and work towards the flourishing of all. Love isn't really love unless its given away.

Kimmerer says that a desire to always have more and then even more and then even more than enough is a culture always looking outside itself for answers, which brings us back to Adam and Eve.

Adam and Eve are surrounded by way more than enough. These two humans have been given everything in the world, and they still don't seem to think that it's enough. One day they are told that they are missing something, and that the thing they are missing is on the one tree that God told them wasn't theirs. It's embarrassing to read - how they literally have everything, and still don't think it's enough. I wish we could just blame them for the fact that we're still doing it, but honestly I think we could've learned by now. God has given us enough. This whole world *is* enough, as long as we keep the gift economy going rather than stopping the wealth with ourselves. When we recognize that everything is a gift; when we take care of the earth that offers us so much; when we give away what we don't need, the flow of wealth and resources keep moving and being recycled so that all can flourish. God provides Adam and Eve with everything they need; God provides us with everything we need; and God invites us into this kind of economy - a gift economy - in which all flourishing is mutual.

In her book, "This Here Flesh," Cole Arthur Riley says that everything changed for her the moment she read the passage of Genesis and realized what God's reaction is to Adam and Eve's sense of shame after they eat the fruit. We so often focus on making God's words harsh and talking about a curse; but why is it, she asks, that no one ever mentions the fact that God is a seamstress? Perhaps we should watch what tone we give to God's words, when we pay attention to the fact that when Adam and Eve can't stand to be seen by God because of their own actions, God goes around collecting the gifts of the earth and weaves them into clothes to wear. God gives them a gift that allows them to feel like they can be seen once more. God the seamstress; God the gift-giver; God, the one who keeps showing them that there is plenty. Even in their height of disobedience, God can't help God's self - God offers them what they need in

hopes that they will realize that all of life is a gift and we have the power to choose whether we are going to always be looking for more, always hoarding what we have; or whether we will share all of the gifts of life so that all can flourish.

I want to be clear this morning that I know this sounds like science fiction. Reading “The Serviceberry” will give you whiplash when you begin to see how we could be operating in this world, how life is intended to be, as compared to the current state of our world. It can almost make one despair to recognize how far from a gift economy we are currently living. But Kimmerer holds out hope that we can re-learn how to care for one another and for the earth; that we have the power to retell our stories and reshape our lives recognizing that everything is a gift and share all of what we have. And because her people, the Anishinabe people, have seen the world come to an end time, not just once but again and again, I dare to hope with her that we too can be reborn. Our Biblical ancestors chose to keep two creation stories, but both stories affirm God’s goodness, the goodness of creation, and the ways we care for one another. This is our sacred calling - to live as those who have been given the world and to love that world in return. Kimmerer asks at the end of the first chapter, what the sun might be in a human gift economy— what is the thing that brings the energy of life, the warmth that fosters growth? Maybe, she says, it is love.

May the God who is love give us the courage to make different choices so that we can work for a world in which all flourishing is mutual.