

The meals served in the diner of life rarely surprise. We order meatloaf, we get meatloaf. But sometimes the waitress brings a lobster and a T-Bone (I like those times), sometimes a bowl of swamp water (I do not like those). Why does life do this to us? I wish I had a good answer. Perhaps it is to rescue us from complacent stupor to truly see again the waitress, the color of the plates, and the swirl as the cream enters the coffee. Maybe life does this to remind us that the strongholds of defense against the future we build are permeable and evanescent. The last few months of 2008 felt mostly like swamp water. In September, I watched on TV as Lehman Brothers employees carried out boxes after the company's bankruptcy. My stomach fell as part of my past (and my savings for the future!) disappeared forever. Just six years earlier I carried boxes into that building as part of the first wave of Lehman employees moving into it after losing our downtown ones. I worked at Lehman, with an incredible 30<sup>th</sup> executive-floor view of midtown Manhattan and Central Park. I was buying as much stock at the employee discount as I could, I earned stock in bonuses, and even bought more at the market rate. I was sure Lehman would outlive all the investment banks, and one of the strongholds I built included Lehman. Whoops! Did I say permeable and evanescent?

The lectionary Gospel text the Sunday after Lehman crumbled was the Parable of the Vineyard Owner (Matthew 20:1-19). Jesus had just been asked by his disciples to give them places of honor in the heavenly kingdom because they had worked so hard and sacrificed so much. Jesus' answered them by telling them this parable of a vineyard owner who hires men throughout the day, then pays them equally. The ones working from morning were upset that the newcomers were paid the same. The owner replied, "Are you envious because I am generous?" The disciples were thinking about God's economy in human terms. But, Jesus tells them, in God's economy, everyone is treated equally no matter how long or well they have labored.

It was a timely gospel lesson that has continued to offer commentary as our economic woes increased. It has led me to think deeply about our human economy versus God's economy. Our economy is one of money, based on resource scarcity, labor, merit, and so forth. We have seen this system abused by people who already made well beyond a day's wage grasping for more, crashing into the Restaurant at the End of the Universe, with only hurt and anxiety on the menu.

I do not think Jesus meant this as a model for a human financial economy. It frankly seems unsustainable, and I found the gravy of merit-based pay to be a great incentive. But these words of Jesus do challenge us to consider basic human needs, and whether we give based on our assumed merit of a person to receive it, or on their human need. Jesus' words raise the question of what we consider "enough". These are personal questions, but ones the answers to which have far-reaching social impact. And we are left, in the here and now, with the more urgent question of managing the anxieties of today. I wish I could say it will be over soon and we will all be okay. But I'm a pastor, not a fortune teller. I do trust that the creativity and entrepreneurial spirit

of our people will raise us up, as it always has, but I do not know when. What I can say is that God knows our suffering and cares deeply for each one of us. That however imperfect our systems might be, God's economy is one of abundant and free grace, in which God the vineyard owner gives (not 'pays', but gives) to everyone equally. However often we are served swamp water here, God is constant in serving only love. All receive an equal share and everyone is taken care of. Not because they took care of themselves, but because God is extravagantly generous, turning no one away and leaving no one left behind. During life's unpalatable meals, I find that to be a helpful ray of hope.