

God's Dream of Economic Fairness

I'd like to talk with you about a topic that, I'm guessing, some of you have never had a chance to learn about. I've certainly never preached about it before today. And I only really learned about it after I had become a minister. I'm talking about the Jubilee year that we read about in the Book of Leviticus.

If I were to describe the Jubilee in contemporary lingo, I'd say it was a whole year where everyone in ancient Israel would just "chill." It was a whole year, occurring every fifty years, where everyone would be "cut a break." Specifically, they wouldn't put crops in the ground so that the soil could have a break. All slaves were released. All debts were canceled. All land that had been sold would revert back to its original owners.

When I think of Jubilee I think of my television remote control. On our TV you can adjust the picture quality and color. There's a little menu that comes on the screen that grants the operator a dangerous amount of control over how the television will work. Contrast, brightness, hue, sharpness, magenta tones, blue tones. You can hurt yourself in that control center. You can get your TV so out of whack that you might actually consider just buying another to get the settings right again. Now there is one saving grace. There's an option

on that menu that reads, "Restore original factory settings." You work a half hour messing up your TV picture. You begin to think that you'll be watching the super bowl with everybody having green faces. But you can push that restore original factory settings button and—jubilee!—your picture is back!

The Jubilee year was like the original factory reset for the whole society of Israel. God, as you'll recall had liberated his slave people from Egypt and groomed them in the wilderness. God's plan was to set them up in the Promised Land where they would live a prosperous, meaningful existence. The concept of individual freedoms was part of it. Everyone was apportioned a plot of land. Laws were put in place to keep the Promised Land from becoming the new Egypt. God wanted his people to live free and secure and faithful.

In order to achieve that vision, God got Moses up on Mount Sinai and gave him the Ten Commandments. He gave them instructions for worship. He gave them lots of laws that insured that a truly fair and wholesome society would be established.

And God also gave Moses and the people of Israel the "original factory reset," namely the Jubilee year so that whatever had gotten out of whack in the social order would be re-balanced.

What do I mean by out of whack? Well, things happen. People had to go into debt to feed their families in hard times. A landowner sells a field. Someone lends money. Wealth pools in some places. Some people drop to the bottom of society. Some become slaves or debt slaves. Others become Warren Buffett or Donald Trump.

Clearly, God wanted to see vibrant economic activity among his people. Therefore he didn't simply outlaw lending and selling and letting some people drop into the lower classes. But God didn't want the inequalities and concentration of wealth to become the permanent state of affairs. Hence the Jubilee year. Every couple of generations there was envisioned a release from inequality and stark social classes. Jubilee.

Now, someone's thinking, "Hmm, how could that possibly work? The answer is, it never did. There's pretty good consensus among scholars that the Jubilee Year never caught on nor was it practiced. So we have the striking situation where God speaks to Moses on Mount Sinai and gives the Ten Commandments and lots of other instructions. And we honor these. It's still a commandment for us to have no other gods and to not steal and not murder. These moral demands are a big deal for us. But faithful people virtually never really attempted to put the Jubilee year into practice.

Now the plot thickens! We leap forward to the time of Jesus. We read a few minutes ago Jesus' inaugural sermon. Jesus introduces his ministry with these words. And notice the language. Release to the captives, liberty for the oppressed, and proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord.

These words are reminiscent of the old Jubilee tradition. The people of Israel may have forgotten the year when the poor got relief and debts were forgiven. But God hadn't forgotten. Jesus' Kingdom crackles with Jubilee principles.

Let me point out a subtlety in the language of this lesson that enriches this for me. Jesus says he comes to "proclaim release to the captives." Later he says, "Set at liberty" the oppressed. The original word for release and liberty or liberate is the same. We've simply used two different English words to translate. Normally, Luke translates this word as "forgiveness." Captives are released or forgiven.

Now the pieces start falling in place! We think of the heart of Jesus' ministry as forgiveness. Jesus died to forgive us our sins. Well, forgiveness is like being set free from the prison of sin. Put differently, to be a sinner is like being crushed under credit card debt. We become slaves to it. More and more of our lives gets tied up in service to trying to make the minimum payments. I'm remembering that in more rudimentary

societies, if you owed too much they put you in prison. Anyway, there are all kinds of ways that we live in bondage.

But God wants us free! God wants all the human family free. He wants people to live in dignity. God detests poverty and hunger and crushing class distinctions. God wanted Israel to live free of these oppressions. And God still wanted the whole human family to live free and wholesomely when Jesus came.

And he still wants them!

What I'd like to invite of myself and all of us is that we put a little jubilee in our lives. Every one of us has within our power the opportunity to "cut someone a break" as we say. I'll bet there's someone who needs release from the captivity of your expectations or anger with them. Forgive and set that person free. That's jubilee.

I'll bet there is an instance where a little sharing of your prosperity would let someone breathe easier. I think of what some of you around here are doing to provide school fees for African young adults. One young lady, Tiko, spent precious funds to purchase internet time so she could send this email thanking some of you:

I wish this mail could be read by all those who have contributed in pay school fees for me. It's something which I don't understand and I don't know how to thank God for this. People from other country, brothers and sisters

in the Lord paying school fees for me. It's really amazing grace.

That's Jubilee!

Oh, I know it's impractical. It won't work. And that's right. There are always good reasons for people to stay poor or indebted or oppressed or down. But Jubilee lies at the heart of Jesus' ministry. God pulled out all the stops to come into this world in Jesus to bring release and relief. Jubilee is a window into the heart of God. Let it be part of your heart too!

A final thought. It's stewardship season. Think Jubilee when you make out that pledge card. And it's election season. Think Jubilee when you go to the polls.

When the spirit came to Jesus he told us what he was all about. He was about forgiveness, release, liberty. And that's good news.