
The Bad Math of a Generous Grace

Matthew 20:1-16

There's been a lot of talk about the economy these days—and for good reason. Well, the reasons themselves aren't so good.

Not to be triggering here, but when we think about an economy, we think of words like inflation, gas prices, tariff policies, manufacturing and jobs, tax cuts, and working families.

You know this . . . An economy is a system that is shaped by a series of decisions around how resources are distributed, how work is rewarded, and how value is assigned.

When we decide what makes for a healthy economy we are asking a basic, fundamental question: How much is there to go around—and who gets it?

You see, you don't have to be a nation to have an economy. You can be a workplace, a community, a family, a church... this is true even of every human heart.

In your economy you are trying to determine: What is valuable? What is scarce? What do people deserve? What do we owe one another?

And, here's where my pastoral antennae perk up: These questions are not just economic considerations, they are spiritual questions as well.

This morning, I'd like to bring you into the economy of *Hadestown*.

If you haven't seen it, *Hadestown* is a Broadway musical which features songs by Anaïs Mitchell to retell the ancient Greek myth stories of Orpheus and Eurydice alongside another about Hades and Persephone.

And it has some really fun music too—drawing on folk, jazz, blues, and New Orleans traditions—to reimagine the myth in a kind of Depression-era, industrial setting.

Hades is the ruler of the underworld, and he has built a strong economy down in the depths of his industrial workhouse—“Way down *Hadestown*.” When the curtain rises on the Second Act, the workers are in a call-and-response with Hades, their boss. It’s one of the most moving second-Act opening songs I think I’ve heard.

Hades leads out in his booming bass voice:

“Why do we build the wall—My children, my children?
Why do we build the wall?”

And the workers respond, singing:

“Why do we build the wall? We build the wall to keep us free. That's why we build the wall. We build the wall to keep us free.”

Hades continues:

“How does the wall keep us free—My children, my children? How does the wall keep us free?

The workers answer:

“How does the wall keep us free? The wall keeps out the enemy. And we build the wall to keep us free. That's why we build the wall. We build the wall to keep us free.”

And back and forth they go:

“Who do we call the enemy—My children, my children?
Who do we call the enemy?”

“Who do we call the enemy? The enemy is poverty.

And the wall keeps out the enemy. And we build the wall to keep us free. That's why we build the wall.

We build the wall to keep us free.”

Eventually, Hades’ tone grows more fierce and loud:

“What do we have that they should want—My children, my children? What do we have that they should want?”

“What do we have that they should want?

We have a wall to work upon! We have work and they have none. And our work is never done.

And the war is never won. The enemy is poverty.

And the wall keeps out the enemy. And we build the wall to keep us free. That's why we build the wall.

We build the wall to keep us free.”

That song will preach a whole sermon in itself.

You can hear in those lyrics the values of that economy repeated: protect what you have, keep what belongs to you, and don't trust that there will be enough for others.

The economy of *Hadestown* is one built on fear and scarcity.

And by its own rules, it can even seem fair. Everyone in *Hadestown* is assigned a value—a measure of worth—according to their place in the system and what they produce. Hades compensates people according to those calculations. If you play by the rules, you will be provided for: you will have food, shelter, and security.

You can hear in that a certain bargain being made:
give your labor, and in return, you will be taken care of.

But the catch is, once you enter into Hades' economy, it is very difficult to leave.

They sing of freedom, but ironically they help to keep alive the very system that keeps them in chains.

If you haven't seen the musical, I urge you to put this one on your list—you can now stream it on multiple platforms.

If for no other reason than to hear Patrick Page, who plays Hades, sing in his other-worldly, low voice!

There are so many spiritual moments in this musical.

Another line that stands out is when Orpheus—who is in love with Eurydice—stands and gives a toast: “To the world we dream about and the one we live in now.”

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus is urging us to dream of a different world, life by another economy.

He tells the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, where a landowner hires workers throughout the day—some early in the morning, others at noon, and some as late as five o’clock. At the end of the day, he pays them all the same daily wage.

The workers that had worked the longest, got paid the same as those who showed up later in the day, and they complain that this isn't fair. But the landowner reminds them that he has paid them exactly what each agreed to.

In the world of economics, it’s bad math. But Jesus here isn’t laying out the blueprint for a successful business. He’s teaching about the economy of God.

In *Hadestown*, your place is determined by your usefulness.

In God’s economy, your place is not something you have to earn at all. It’s the gift of a generous grace.

When you ask the questions: Who gets to belong? Who has earned the right because they’ve been here the longest? Who is the greatest . . . has contributed the most? Who has worked the hardest?

Jesus keeps moving people, who by conventional standards are standing at the front of the line, to the back, and those at the back up to the front.

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Here’s where I think all of this becomes so important.

When we live within the values of God’s economy, we begin to treat people differently, don’t we. Their success or their abundance doesn’t threaten our own sense of worth and security.

We also don’t prioritize only those who can earn their place in our lives. In that sense, we live with a generous unfairness.

How the world could use some unmerited kindness these days.

In 2013, George Saunders, one of the most celebrated contemporary American writers of our time, gave a Commencement speech that went viral. He was speaking to the graduating class at Syracuse University on what he called, the “Failures of Kindness”.

The premise of the talk was how he regretted one thing in his successful life and that is that he wasn’t more kind...

With all the stupid things he did in his long life, all the bad decisions he made, it was the regret of not showing more kindness, like looking back to his 7th grade year, when a new girl came to his school and struggled with being picked on.

He could see that she was lonely and without friends. And then one day, they suddenly moved. He wasn’t *unkind*, especially compared to what the others were doing, but he never did anything to change her situation. And decades later he still thinks about it.

In that speech, George talks about a series of what he calls “built-in confusions” that stand in the way of living a kind, grace-filled life with others.

He says, one confusion is that we believe we are “central to the universe”—that our personal story is the main and most interesting story, or the only story.

Another confusion is living with the idea that we are anatomically separate from the universe and each other—that there is US and then, out there, everything else.

And a third, that we are permanent here. That death is a reality for other people, but not for me.

These are not things we actually believe when we actually think about it, but for how we live out our lives, it’s the economy we’re working from. We prioritize our needs over someone else’s, even if internally we WANT to be less selfish and more aware of others.

I don’t want to simply rehash what is a truly great speech—you can go listen to it for yourself—but one quote he used really stayed with me. He talked about what poet Hayden Carruth wrote in a poem near the end of his life, that he was “mostly Love, now.”

George was making the point that he thinks the older you get the more loving you become, quite naturally. And he was telling this to a bunch of 20-somethings.

He said: "As you grow older...YOU will gradually be replaced by LOVE." Isn't that a beautiful thought?

But his advice was not to wait for that to naturally happen. To start now. To speed it along.

For those of us here, we are likely quite naturally outgrowing the tendency to live by the economy of this world. We are slowly becoming love. For some of you, it is still a daily struggle. You are still in the fight, and you are learning what it takes to choose kindness over our tendency to merely react according to what people deserve.

This is what Paul meant when he wrote in the first chapter of Philippians. He says to "live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."

This act of removing ourselves from the center and centering the needs of those around you is the way of Christ. It makes little sense. It's bad math. But it's the way of a generous grace.

Now go and do likewise. Amen.