



# THE BIBLE, THE RECESSION AND OUR NEIGHBOR

Last year's economic downturn highlighted our need for one another

BY WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

**T**he economic recession of the last year was a big wake-up call for people in United States society. In a generative economy and an atmosphere of prosperity, our culture had tended toward complacency and self-indulgence inching toward selfishness. As result of the loss and pain of the recession, it is clear that we have, as a society, important things to learn. And we have important things to unlearn as well.

## SIX LESSONS

**1.** We have learned that we are connected and interrelated and cannot do without each other. We had thought, in a context of excessive individualism, it was every man or woman for self in a system where some would win and succeed and others would lose and fail, and the winners did not need to bother with the losers. But now we are being drawn back to the old awareness of the neighbor, an awareness featured both in our faith tradition as well as in the rural ethos of an earlier society. We are learning afresh that the neighbor is not an inconvenience or a competitor, but a member with us in our communal fabric. The tradition of the Old Testament reverberates with neighborliness, culminating in the mandate to love neighbor as self (*Leviticus 19:18*). And Jesus

relentlessly pushed the question of the neighbor (see *Luke 10:36-37*). And now, when the practice of self-sufficiency can no longer be sustained, we are seeing very many folk become more dependent on a neighborly infrastructure. It is clear that such neighborliness that constitutes a network of lifelines is not a given, but a task requiring sustained intentionality.

**2.** We have learned that of all of our neighbors, the poor, the vulnerable and the marginal are the ones who must receive the most active care from those wealthy enough to share, strong enough to reach out and entitled enough to include.

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is a clear example of the call of the Gospel to neighborliness. In the story,

such a call is an inconvenient truth because it summons outside the comfortable community to find the neighbor among the not well regarded "others."

The Latin American Catholic bishops have spoken wondrously about "God's preferential option for the poor." It is a concept often echoed by Pope John Paul II affirming that the poor hold a special place in God's compassion and therefore merit a special place in the neighborhood's compassion. The Old Testament commandments speak frequently of the triad of the marginal — the widow, the orphan, the immigrant — by which they refer to those who are without financial or legal resources in a patriarchal society of male land-owners (*Deuteronomy 24:17-22; Jeremiah 7:6*). The commandments of the Bible oblige the strong neighbors to extend themselves and their resources to those without resources because they, too, are entitled to the security and well-being that the resources of the community can provide. In the New Testa-



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ment, more familiarly, Jesus refers to “the least,” among whom he includes the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked and the prisoner (*Matthew 25:31-46*). And in his inventory of transformative healings, he enumerates the blind, the lame, lepers, the deaf, the dead and the poor (*Luke 7:22*). It cannot be accidental that in this index, “the poor” are mentioned in the final, climactic clause, the one that receives the most emphasis. It is the sharing of communal resources that causes the poor to “have good news brought to them.”

### **In the end, the big learning from the recession may be the fresh awareness that to be authentically human is to have a capacity for empathy and compassion and to express it in myriad ways, private, personal and public.**

The recession is an opportunity to think again about the infrastructure of the community and the ways in which the poor, vulnerable and marginal are entitled members of the community. The binge of self-indulgence in which we have been engaged predictably assured that such as they were regarded as, at best, social inconveniences to be disregarded or excluded. The current debate about health care reform pivots exactly on questions about deployment of communal resources for those who are without such resources.

3. We have learned that the bodily realities of food, clothing, health, housing and work constitute an irreducible human agenda that cannot be nullified. That is, after all the political posturing, after all the ideological mantras, some of which have become very loud, we are still left with the inescapable awareness that human persons are fully embodied creatures whose fleshly requirements must inescapably be served. Society, in the end, cannot tolerate that some should be hungry or ill-housed or ill-

clothed or left sickly and vulnerable and neglected. We have been on a binge of ideology, including some forms of escapist “spirituality,” pretending bodily reality is an inconvenience meriting little attention.

But of course, the Bible knows otherwise. The crucial nature of bodily, fleshly reality is grounded in the creator God who called bodily reality “good.” That affirmation, moreover, culminates in the confession of Jesus as the Word who “became flesh” and

who went about tending to the aches and pains, the hurts and hopes of human persons. That bodily reality is wondrously articulated in the poem of *Isaiah 58* that is an argument about “true worship”:

*Is this not the fast that I choose?  
To loose the bonds of injustice,  
To undo the thongs of the yoke,  
To let the oppressed go free,  
And to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
And bring the homeless poor into your house;  
When you see the naked to cover them,  
And not to hide yourself from your own kin? (*Isaiah 58:6-7*).*

True worship, according to this poem, consists in acts of bread, clothing and home for those victimized by injustice. In this poem, all the rest of posturing about worship is idle and self-deceiving unless the “flesh” of the other is acknowledged and taken seriously.

4. We have learned, or are learning, that greed is not good. A favorite mantra of the '90s was the opposite — that greed is good, causing us to make idols of all kinds of performers and managers who have accumulated vast sums of money while others have been left behind. Gordon Gekko of Oliver Stone's movie “Wall Street” was wrong. We should have known better, but as a society we have been duped into illusionary pursuits of well-being at the expense of the common good.

As early as Mt. Sinai, God had declared, “You shall not covet” (*Exodus 20:17*). This final commandment of the ten is not a warning against private little acts of envy; it is rather aimed at an acquisitive society that believes and practices the “virtue” of getting all you can at the expense of the neighbor.

Jesus' parable in *Luke 12* characterizes a rich, successful farmer who kept expanding his property and his resources without limit. In a culture of greed modeled by the parable, the pursuit of desire is an end in itself without reference to what that pursuit yields or what damage it may cause. In a dark, understated way, the parable ponders the outcome of such greed that it calls “foolish” (*Luke 12:20*). In the story that Jesus told, such covetousness causes death in the night. The character in the parable had no sense of community or context, but in fact cared for nothing but his own aggrandizement. And as far as we know, he died his death all alone, in social isolation, for greed cuts us off from the neighborhood. The parable teaches us there is no future in greediness. And Paul, in his summons to the church, asserts that covetousness is a form of idolatry, the worship of false gods (*Colossians 3:5*).

5. It follows, in the parable of *Luke 12* as in our own lives, that coveting makes us anxious, for we worry about having enough, and having more, and having more than the others. As a result, greed evokes a kind of restless preoccupation against which Jesus warns

his disciples (*Luke 12:22*). Jesus searingly warns them against anxiety about getting more food or more clothing or more days to their lives, and we have learned, in and through the recession, that generosity beats anxiety every time. The anxiety generated by greed is self-defeating, because it destroys the well-being we desperately hunger for.

The alternative to such anxiety about ourselves is to get our minds off of ourselves and to act in generosity toward the neighborhood that gives rather than receives, that shares rather than takes. Such a way of life is grounded in an awareness that life is an ongoing process of giving and receiving in a community of many members rather than a competition to be won. Already in the teaching of Moses, we are warned about being “tight-fisted” toward a needy neighbor or governed by “mean thoughts” (*Deuteronomy 15:7-9*). Instead, says Moses, “Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so.” And Paul, in his bid for a generous offering for the church, roots that generosity in the self-giving of God in Christ: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” (*2 Corinthians 8:9*)

Finally the flow of generosity begins with God’s own reach toward the world, for God needed or wanted to, hold nothing back of God’s self. And we, in the image of that God, replicate

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that divine generosity. When we curb generosity in our anxiety, the curbing reflects our reluctance to trust the truth of God and our fall back on our own miserly resources.

**6.** In the end, the big learning from the recession may be the fresh awareness that to be authentically human is to have a capacity for empathy and compassion and to express it in myriad ways, private, personal and public. The notion of compassion in biblical faith is an interesting visceral usage. In the Hebrew of the Old Testament, the term “compassion” is linked to the term “womb,” so that it may be rendered as “womb-like mother love,” the kind of irrational, unconditional, tenacious urge of care and attentiveness for the other. Thus in *Isaiah 49*, God is portrayed as a nursing mother who is always mindful of child-Israel (*Isaiah 49:14-15*). The reason God is mindful, like every mother of a nursing child, is that the body of the mother hurts if she does not nurse. The prophet has no reluctance to reach to such bodily imagery in order to express the deep passion and resolve of this mother-God toward the needy creature.

In the New Testament, it is important to note that Jesus “had compassion” on the hungry crowd (*Mark 6:34*;

*8:2*). The Greek term in the New Testament means that he had his innards churned and disturbed by the plight of the hungry. His churning body moved to caring, generous action in his feeding miracles. Thus in both the Old and New Testaments, God is presented as being bodily, physically moved by the need of God’s weak, needy creatures. And so when Jesus teaches “Blessed are the merciful,” (*Matthew 5:7*), he may well mean that the “fortunate ones” are those who are capable of being moved and stirred by neighborly need, because such a capacity for contact with needfulness is the quintessence of humanness as God wills it.

It follows that the exercise of compassion is an alternative to the cynical, selfish practices that have invoked the recession. The learning now available is a chance in our society to disengage from the frantic drive for more, to break the numbing indifference that besets us, to embrace a vulnerability that refuses fear and violence and so creates new possibilities for life and well-being. Thus the learning we may now embrace is not primarily cognitive or intellectual, though those are not unimportant. But the key learning is that the investment of our bodies in the lives of other bodies, particularly those that require neighborly attentiveness, is the practice of our God-given humanness. It is that compassion that characteristically breaks the vicious cycles of death. The capacity to feel with and feel for — and then to act — is a recovery urgent and now possible among us.

#### LESSONS AHEAD

**1.** The matter of learning and unlearning is an ongoing process that is never finished, always again required. So it is that Jesus declares, “No one can serve two masters” (*Matthew 6:24*). One cannot serve the cause of neighborliness and at the same time be “loyal” to greed. Long before Jesus, Moses summoned Israel to “choose life and not death” (*Deuteronomy 30:20*) which means, in our time, a choice of neighborliness

over selfish individualism. The choice in our society is always against the grain of dominant social values around us, for the world around us does not much value compassion that inconveniences.

2. The current debate on health care reform exhibits the choices we are always making between neighborly care and inordinate self-care. But the debate also includes another big challenge: whether the practice of compassionate neighborliness is a private, one-on-one matter or if the government is essential to the delivery of real healing resources to real people. Outside the heat of the debate, it seems clear enough in biblical tradition that government may be a form of public compassion that may and must be mobilized alongside private initiative. We are, however, by no means finished with that question.

3. The prophetic tradition of ancient Israel may continue to ring in our ears as we learn in and through the recession. The prophetic tradition is agreed that the question of the economy must be subordinated to the neighborly reality that concerns compassion, mercy, generosity and fidelity. And when we forget that subordination, as we have forgotten in recent time, prophets warn of big trouble sure to come. Thus Jeremiah's indictment of the urban economy

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of Jerusalem concerns precisely that lack of compassion:

*Like a cage full of birds,  
Their houses are full of treachery;  
Therefore they have become great  
and rich.  
They have grown fat and sleek.  
They know no limits in deeds of  
wickedness;  
They do not judge with justice the cause  
of the orphan, to make it prosper,  
And they do not defend the rights  
of the needy. (Jeremiah 5:27-28)*

Given that data, God then asks wistfully,

*Shall I not punish them for these things?  
Says the Lord,  
And shall I not bring retribution  
On a nation such as this? (Jeremiah  
5:29)*

The implication is that the God of the Gospel is profoundly impatient with and upset by such exploitation. And Amos, before Jeremiah, could imagine that lack of compassion for the poor would lead to displacement (*Amos 4:1-3*).

We keep learning, always again, as these old poets continue with their relentless truthfulness. Ours is a time ripe for learning, and for the transformations that may follow.

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