

Sermon by the Rev. Nick Uthall, Saint Steven's Lutheran Church, Monona, WI
7th Sunday after Epiphany – 20 Feb 11
Matthew 5:38-48; Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
Hymn: *Lord of All Nations, Grant Me Grace* (ELW #716)

Collective bargaining.

It's a term more familiar to us this week than ever before. For some, it was that it crowded the news, moving events from Egypt instead to our own downtown. For some of us collective bargaining was an accusation, signifying somebody trying to take more than they deserved or needed. For many of us, collective bargaining became a cry and shout this week, whether around the Capitol or around kitchen tables as we were left to wonder how families would be sustained. In my family, numerous teachers spread over three generations lamented and protested.

On any side, this is a very personal issue connected to our own worldviews. But it is not only personal. However we encountered the question of collective bargaining this week, it is also a question for faith. What is God up to in the midst of so much civil tension? And how do we think about it and act as Christians?

Certainly Scripture has plenty to say about economic justice and we have the particular coincidence that the lectionary offers today this reading from Leviticus. It might be heard as if it were written for this week. To start, this reading legislates that workers be properly compensated, saying that wages cannot be held back from them. It says that you shall not defraud, a word in Hebrew that can also be translated do not oppress, do not treat with injustice, do not commit extortion. Strong biblical language that hits our ears this week in a special way.

Also, twice the reading reiterates the 7th commandment: you shall not steal. Not stealing is not only avoiding burglary, but involves on the other side, in Luther's words, that we help our neighbors "to improve and protect their property and income." In a Lutheran view, that is part of a good, basic definition of the role of government. God works through laws to keep stealing to a minimum and instead to improve and protect property and income for all.

In good government and beyond, this highlights for us some of what God's labor is in and around us. As in all of our lives, God is at work in economic struggle. And economy is an obvious part of faith. See, that word "economic" literally means "household management," whether in our homes, for our state, or around the world. The "eco" part of the word is the same as in ecology. For our belief, this whole world—and beyond—is a single, connected household. What we have from Jesus, then, is a summary of the strategy for how God runs the place and manages his household. It is contained in this: "God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."

In tracing through that belief of God's work, it becomes also for us an ethic, becomes our calling to live faithfully. Today this is a challenge to those who govern and it is a challenge for us. This is how God's economic outlook works, and we are to follow in this manner of giving, to be perfect like our Father in heaven. God's goal is distribution to all; everybody gets what they need, no questions. Now, there's no way I alone can calculate exactly how that message of God distributing sun and rain translates today into health care and retirement benefits or how it can be correlated with balancing the budget of a state. That is something to talk about, to negotiate. Given that it is what God expects of us, though, we cannot turn away from this mandate, even if our situation may seem very difficult. Never would I claim that it's easy to figure out what is enough and how to spread things around.

But what we should absolutely insist is that we are called to imitate God's generosity. As our God is a God of abundance, as this world is filled with God's good gifts, we are called to share our abundance, our assets that may be spread around. See, we are not people who work from a deficit. We are not people who inflict the burden on others. Seeing the world the way God does, we begin always with gracious giving and do not take what we contribute to each other for granted. In God's economy, the budget is not balanced on the backs of others. The solution is not through taking away, but in what more people need to live well.

This calling is, after all, what it means to live with love. And love, that strange economic strategy of God's, doesn't work with our normal balance sheets. Love makes it all different. See, love is always about asking what is best. Love, then, cannot be hoarded. Love can never be selfish, or else it dissolves. As that

passage later in 1st Corinthians reminds us, "love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way." And so love will always be pressing our boundaries out on behalf of others, to distribute as abundantly and impartially as God does. "Love your neighbor" becomes the mantra of this economy.

If we are to follow this and to live as children of our heavenly Father, this is certainly a challenge, because it must necessarily also mean loving enemies. This is not only in getting along with those you like. It is making sure everyone has what they need and to appreciate what each gives. It cannot be content in calling state workers lazy whiners. It cannot be content in throwing names at Governor Walker. Love has to find a way forward, even when you're right and someone else is wrong.

Let it also be said that loving neighbors and loving enemies is not about giving in to false or evil viewpoints. It is not in surrendering what God has worked for. It doesn't mean that you must make concessions to an incorrect opinion. Love, according to Leviticus, also involves rebuking what is wrong, what is against God's strategy. Your vocation on behalf of your neighbors, no matter how you may feel about them, is to stand up and argue for them for what is right and good, to follow through on God's economy, again, in the Luther's words on the 7th commandment, "to improve and protect their property and income."

This love of your neighbors may be a challenge, but it is also part of an obvious reality of living together in this economy. We are all in this household together. We cannot think that it can be managed only at the expense of some, or only for the profit of others. We will quickly see that the economy of our state and the larger economy tied to all of ecology cannot be run sustainably if some simply try to run away with it all. None can be pushed aside. What is done to one affects all. All our resources and all our work is interconnected. There are no self-sustained individuals; we are always dependent on each other and on this planet. This is the logical extension of loving even your enemies, that we must live in solidarity because without our shared vocations we cannot live at all. The sooner we realize and work for that, the better lives will be in this place and the better life will continue to be in the future on this planet.

That is the ethic connected to our belief. But our beliefs are not only for the sake of our actions and ethics. Yes, we see the biblical mandate and the challenge. Yes, we see our vocations involve sharing our gifts, in distributing far and wide. But finally we see that this is not only dependent on our choices, because this strange economic strategy that is the truth of the world around us is God's blessing. It is not what God wants us to do that is finally and importantly decisive, but what God does for us.

We have the benefit of belief, having been shown the "more excellent way." So to start here in this place, we gather to confess in faith that we are loved, no matter what. Here we are all part of a union, united in the one Body of Christ. This is not based on our kind feelings toward each other. God in Christ makes us family. We are in this together. We see the Lord with each other. We offer ourselves to each other.

And beyond ourselves, we more broadly believe that we are in the same boat, or in the same economy, the same household, this one planet. Here, united with all God's creatures, all our brothers and sisters under God, we see the amazing expanse of collective bargaining. And that is not mostly what we are struggling to get from each other, not that we are struggling to love. It is certainly not that we are united in needing to beg, even in our prayers.

See, here it is that we confess that the true collective bargaining comes from God on our collective behalf. God is bargaining for us and all that God has made, trying to care for us and give us everything. God is working on the best for this world, working to share all, working to love you. God has to keep at it, keep negotiating with us and bringing us back to the table, because we tend to obscure this goodness. So it is not because any of us in our passion or our ignorance, our conniving or our organizing, our politicking or parading—none of us has proven ourselves worthy. It is just that God wants everybody, no matter what, no matter who they are, to have what you need. God provides. "God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." And for that, let us offer a collective "Amen."