

02/01/15 University Public Worship

The Exorcism of our Economism (Brian E. Konkol)

\* The following transcript is from a sermon given at Stanford Memorial Church, on the campus of Stanford University (Stanford, California), on February 1, 2015. Please note that the below manuscript was written with the intention for it to be heard, not read, thus the various grammatical choices (which are preserved below in full) were made with an emphasis on the ear, not the eye.

*<sup>21</sup> They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup> They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup> Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup> and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." <sup>25</sup> But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" <sup>26</sup> And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup> They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." <sup>28</sup> At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee (Mark 1:21-28).*

To the Office of Religious Life, I thank you, for the opportunity and responsibility to speak today.

To the public worshipping community here at Stanford Memorial Church, with hopeful expectation, I thank you - in advance - for the generosity of your attention this day.

And of course, to the God that binds us together, I especially thank, for the gift of my weekend liberation from the snow and cold of Minnesota that I am enjoying this day!

And so, with honor, humility and freshly thawed-out fingers and toes, we begin. And as we do, I invite you to join me in a moment of prayer, with words inspired by the late-Franciscan Priest, Father Thomas O'Neil, former Chaplain of Viterbo University in La Crosse, Wisconsin, whose ministry and memory I wish to honor on this occasion. Let us pray:

*Youthful and spirited God, fill our minds with sacred curiosity and a holy devotion for learning, open our burning hearts with compassion for the liberation of all creation, shape our formative wills to do what is right and just, and bless us always with a desire to create alongside you and make all things new. This is our prayer, we trust it is your desire. Amen.*

My office on the campus of Gustavus Adolphus College is located sixty-four miles to the south from the Vatican City of North American merchandising, known throughout Minnesota and beyond as “The Mall of America” (not pretentious whatsoever!), but can be more accurately described as a sacred cathedral of commerce.

The Mall of America. A Holy Land of retail.

From trendy stores (...and yes, we do have trendy stores in Minnesota!), to posh and prim cafes and gargantuan amusement rides – all of which charge no sales tax of any kind. A super shopping center filled with strange resident slang of the North such as “Uff-Da”, “Don’t ya Know”, and “You-betcha”, all of which is melodically mixed with the veracious vernacular of visitors from far and wide. A massive mall with five-hundred stores covered across four miles of store front footage, all located within five million square feet of gross building area. A monstrous Mecca of the Marketplace, which receives tens of millions of visitors each year, and in doing so, generates billions of dollars in annual revenue.

All together, this so-called Minnesota “Mega-Mall” is a prosperous and popular place for a plethora of people, and it is not difficult to discern why. Because, the seductive sights, the soothing sounds and the sensational smells of such a striking sales synagogue, all seek to sink into some of the most significant yearnings of the modern day spirit. Which is why, one can argue that, the Mall of America is, for many, a religious site.

With its symbols and rituals, with its passionate pilgrims searching to fill a hole in their souls, with its high priests that build and protect their temple at all costs, and with its devout adherents paying homage to their ultimate concerns through the liturgical rhythm of purchase and sale: The Mall of America is an allegory of modern day popular religiosity. For the megamall represents, in many ways, the various means by which **production and consumption has become our worship, because gross domestic product has become our god, and as a result, “economism” has become our most popular and prosperous religious tradition.**

Economism, a term used by numerous social theorists across the generations, can indeed be considered a highly organized and deeply flourishing popular religion. As theologian John B. Cobb wrote at the turn of our current century, a commitment to the creeds of economism encourages people to believe that economic growth will directly solve any and all of the world’s most pressing problems, and ultimately, provide the resources needed to pursue any and all of our most important values. Or in other words, the dogmas of economism require that the structures and systems we set as stewards of God’s household, are all designed in such a way that our faithfulness is judged primarily on our contributions to the cultivation of gross

domestic product, as if our salvation is somehow determined by the divine-like desires of the so-called invisible hand of the marketplace.

And I speak of such matters on this Sunday in Epiphany, because, similar to the ways in which the unclean spirits were confronted and cleansed in our Gospel lesson for this morning, it is important that we - as a matter of faith - name and disclaim that which seizes the spirit of our society in our day and age. And quite frankly, although the spirit of economism has become so prevalent that we often fail to perceive it, let alone confront it, as a matter of faith, when we do perceive it, we are called to confront it! Because, to appraise human value and community well-being based solely upon economic growth is an explicit and oppressive form of dehumanization, and is thus, directly in contrast to our most treasured of theological affirmations.

And therefore, similar to the 1st Chapter of Mark's Gospel, our theological affirmations should have personal and public implications. Thus, we too - in this time and place - seek an exorcism from our economism, and therefore, a restored vision of being for all as we know it.

Yes, we do seek something new! We live at a time when an increasing number of people work at jobs they don't like, to buy things they don't need, all in order to impress people they can't stand! We seek something new, because we do live in a day of systematic dehumanization, because that is what our economism does. In specifics, economism leads to what Nick Haslam of the University of Melbourne called "mechanistic dehumanization", a way in which powerful systemic processes slowly and significantly strip away the dignity of human life, and in doing so, turn us against one another - and ourselves - in a never ending fight. Which means, in turn, that such mechanistic dehumanization breeds our personal and public enslavement, for in our search to produce and consume far beyond our natural limits, we are the ones who end up being both produced and consumed. For ultimately, although it all may leave an elite few with a few more possessions, we are ultimately left possessed, by an un-economy that is un-fair, un-just, and un-sustainable, that requires us to be un-healthy, un-happy, and simply un-human.

But thanks be to God, the sun does shine on the first day of February! And in the spirit of this Season of Epiphany, the God that continues to be revealed in Jesus continues to thaw-out our spirits on this glorious day!

Because, in what can be described as life-changing amazing-grace in the context of how many tend to connect Christianity with our dominant economic culture, the biblical narrative records Jesus of Nazareth as coming into the world as anything but an economic stimulus

package! As shared throughout the pages of the New Testament, Jesus was born in a barn as a homeless refugee to an unwed teenage mother amidst the stink and slop of farm animals, which would undoubtedly earn Jesus the label of “economic liability” in our current GDP-obsessed and possessed day and age.

Yet as the grace of God incarnate, Jesus amazingly humanizes the mechanistically dehumanized! He consistently challenges the “culture of having” with revolutionary “Good News of being!” And in doing so, he reveals what it means to be most fully human in the image and likeness of God, and what it therefore means to be valued participants in the peaceable and beloved Community of God: That is fair, just, and sustainable, and frees us to be healthy, happy and most fully human.

Which in turn means, the God made known here today in word and sacrament, ushers in a dramatic and prophetic repeal of how we far too often determine human value and social well-being, for we are given good news, as we are shown not only that all humans are sacred and valuable, but once again we are promised that being a community is about far more than merely what we buy from - or sell to - one another.

Which finally means, that in response to the divine acceptance we celebrate in this space, the rules of God’s household, (the *oikos-nomos*), should be more informed by the wisdom of the household, (the *oikos-logos*), for the sake of (the *oikoumene*), all that exists in this glorious household, so that we can be set free from the need to have, and set free for the ability to be.

And this, I believe, is what is taking place in our Gospel text for today.

In the 1st Chapter of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus travels to Capernaum, which alone is both noteworthy and significant, as Capernaum served as a distinguished economic center in that particular social context, with its proximity to a major east-west trade route, and therefore, a political center for the empire of its time. It is no coincidence that Jesus of Nazareth was drawn to such a site, because as Erich Fromm writes, from the onset Jesus’ ministry was a protest against the “having structure” of society.

As one born into an occupied state and raised within a social system that defined him as being far outside the appreciated elite, within the very first chapter of this earliest written synoptic Gospel, Jesus intentionally and urgently travels to Capernaum, where “the structure of having” had grown to the point of being a defining characteristic of both work and worship. With full intention to reshape his audience with spiritual disobedience, Jesus travels into this 1st century “pre-modern-mega-mall” and he directly confronts that which props-up their particular culture of commodification, and as we hear in the text: All are amazed.

All are amazed! For at the very onset of his ministry, Jesus abruptly strikes the chains that enslave by exorcising the economism that he encounters. He resurrects the inherent dignity of human identity. He disobeys the economic culture of conformity. He offers a bold and holy alternative vision for what the community of God can be. And as the text reveals, all in his presence were amazed. And today, as we too are confronted with what it really means to be, we too are amazed by what it all means.

We too are amazed at what this all means, because, as he did in Capernaum years ago, Jesus defies docility this day, he cuts deep into the dominant dehumanizing declarations of our contemporary society, Jesus reaches into the systemic and structural spirits that seek to submit us and our society, and we too are set free to be: Though the faith that we are accepted, we are forgiven, and we are recipients of value and mercy regardless of who we are, regardless of what we have done, regardless of where we are going, and regardless of where we have been. And thus, our various contributions to society are a response to God's grace, rather than our feeble and tormented attempts to earn it.

Which further means, as people with a restored vision of human value, we are given the freedom to consider “holy alternatives” to the dominant status quo of how we far too often determine our social well-being. More specifically, as Cardinal Reinhard Marx affirmed on this campus just weeks ago, because all beings are valued, and because all lives matter, regardless of what one does or does not have, instead of allowing ourselves to be judged and structured based solely on the market value of all goods produced, as a matter of faith, we should utilize indicators and systems that promote genuine community and authentic peace, by taking into account a more holistic, inclusive and affirming view of all life.

Or, to go against my (passive) Minnesota Lutheran proclivities and put this all just a bit more bluntly: The religion of Economism is ultimately an unclean spirit that seeks to possess our society. It turns our malls into cathedrals and our cathedrals into malls! And while it convulses and cries out with a loud voice whenever it is challenged, as a matter of faith, we must silence it and drive it out, for the sake of life in its fullness.

Which means, as we determine the structures and systems that guide our society, as a matter of faith, we are called to more fully take into account matters that most matter. Or in other words, because God does love the world, and because economics profoundly shapes and impacts the world, as a matter of faith, we are called to set rules that put people above profit throughout our world, and in doing so, promote the quality of life with economics that actually promote that which makes life most worth living.

And so, to close where this all began, when I fly back to Minnesota in the very near future, to a job I love alongside students I adore, on a college campus sixty-four miles to the south from the Vatican City of North American merchandising, I will be reminded that although we all should be moved to make various contributions to our society, as a matter of faith, we should resist the temptation to kneel at the altars of acquisition and assembly both in the malls and in the cathedrals. Because, as Mark's Gospel reveals, life is ultimately about *being* something rather than simply *having* something, as we are "human beings" created in the image and likeness of God, and not "human havings" created in the image and likeness of the market.

And in order to pursue such aims, there is a holy alternative to the unclean spirit of our economic conformity. For instead of enslaving others and ourselves in the search to make more, and rather than trying to justify ourselves through the quest to consume more, we are given a holy alternative of compassion and generosity that affirms the humanity of others - and ourselves - in response to the assurance that all people are of infinite value. We are given a holy alternative that reveals the critical difference between human needs and wants, and in doing so, we are all inspired to want to embrace the crucial need of life-giving deeds that build up rather than tear down. We are given a holy alternative to affirm the life-freeing incarnational reality that we do not need valuable things in order to be valuable beings, nor do we need to produce and consume more and more goods in order for our society to be more and more affirmed as good.

And ultimately, because the Gospel shows us the "being" is greater than "having", we are given a holy alternative by which we all may embrace the security, strength, and genuine freedom to refuse to allow our personal and public worth to be possessed by the select few, for we are ultimately possessed by, the peace that surpasses all understanding, the good news that, by God's grace, we are always being made new.

In conclusion, please know that I thank you and I thank God for the opportunity to be with you this day. I am honored to be with you. Until the time we meet again, may God continue to bless you and keep you, and may God's face continue to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May God continue to look upon you with favor, and give you peace. Today and always. Amen.