

Deut. 30:11-14, 19; James 2:1-13; Luke 6:27-38
2013 Commencement Eucharist

God's Economy*

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Good afternoon. What a wonderful day it's been for the EDS community, and what a great beginning to our commencement festivities!

I want to start right off by congratulating the class of 2013. Since you are not sitting together, could those of you who are members of the graduating class please stand up so that we can acknowledge you? Congratulations – you made it! Or, perhaps I should say, you made it *with a lot of help* – help from your family, your friends, your loved ones, your communities of faith, the EDS community, and God.

It's wonderful to see so many of you who are graduating at this Eucharist, and I wanted to extend a special welcome to all those present who have loved you, cared for you, and sustained you during your time at EDS. And let us pause for a moment and remember all those who could not be here in person, for whatever reason.

It's an honor for me to preach at your commencement Eucharist. Many of you arrived here in the fall of 2010, which also happened to be *my* first semester at EDS. So in a way, we're members of the same entering class, and it's been a real privilege to journey with you during the last three years.

Others of you were already old timers, hardened and cynical, when I arrived in Cambridge – and still you welcomed me with generosity, patience, and kindness. Back then, I kept on thinking about the scene from *The Sound of Music* in which Julie Andrews arrived as the new governess to the Von Trapp family, and the children would torment her with frogs and pine cones. Thank you for keeping the frogs and pine cones to a minimum! (I'm not quite sure what it says that I thought of myself as Julie Andrews, but I guess that's what you get for hiring a queer theologian like me.)

The rest of you joined the EDS community more recently, and it's been a blessing for me to get to know you inside and outside of the classroom. Not surprisingly, this graduating class will always have a very special place in my heart!

Graduating from EDS is a huge accomplishment. And I'm not just talking about the classes. I'm talking about those course worksheets. Figuring out what to underline,

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italicize, and bracket is the equivalent of earning a Ph.D. at most places. And I say that as a member of the Degrees Committee!

And that's not all. During your time here, you've successfully navigated the simulcast technology, survived the PowerCampus conversion, got up to speed on Canvas, moved from counting courses to counting credits, and learned all kinds of acronyms such as TL, DL, B&G, SEC, FEC, DC, KHR, ABL, PSC, and now – as soon-to-be alums – AEC. So congratulations on a huge accomplishment!

I find it interesting that, for this time of celebration and thanksgiving, you chose a series of biblical texts that focus on economic issues. (Thank you, by the way, for not choosing a “text of terror” from Dean Bauer-Levesque’s class for me to preach on.) I don’t know about you, but I was really struck by all of the references to money and commerce in today’s lessons.

For example, in this afternoon’s gospel passage from Luke, Jesus talks a lot about financial transactions, including the acquisition and disposal of goods, and lending and borrowing from others. We even hear about practices in the ancient marketplace in which merchants would carefully measure purchases of grain in a container by pressing down the grain, shaking them together, and pouring them into the folds of the buyer’s garment.

But it’s an incredibly strange economy that’s described in the gospel, isn’t it? One might even call it a “queer” economy. It’s an economy in which we are taught to give away our belongings if someone asks for them. One in which we are supposed to lend to others without any expectations of repayment. And one in which we are called to give generously – by pressing down, shaking together, and running over, whether it’s grain in the marketplace, or love for one’s neighbor.

We also see this same strange economy mentioned in the reading from the Letter of James, in which the poor and the rich are to be treated alike. An economy in which someone who wears dirty clothes is to be welcomed just as much as someone who wears gold rings and fine garments.

Given that we live in a culture that worships wealth, material goods, and the invisible hand of the free market, is it any wonder that so many of our acquaintances think that we who have gone to seminary have lost our minds? What kind of training have we received after one, two, three, four, five, or even more years? Are we really prepared for the economic challenges of the “real world”? To paraphrase the Book of Deuteronomy, are these teachings about God’s economy “too hard” for us? Are these lessons too far away – in the heavens and beyond the sea?

I love that you chose these readings about God’s economy because they connect deeply with my own experience of seminary. I know from personal experience that the decision to attend seminary is often one of great economic sacrifice.

As many of you know, I spent seventeen years as a lawyer in New York City before becoming a seminary professor – including over five years practicing in Wall Street law firms. During that time, my work involved negotiating multi-million dollar deals and transactions. Quite frankly, I would have been fired if I ever practiced law in accordance with God’s economy. I could never have drafted loan provisions that didn’t have airtight repayment clauses, or contracts that gave away a penny of my client’s assets without extracting something in return.

Although my experiences in that so-called “real world” economy paid well, I was actually impoverished inside. In fact, I was destitute, spiritually speaking. My clients were often the very people who, as James writes in our epistle reading, were oppressing the poor and dragging them into court.

I remember waking up one morning around fifteen years ago, turning to my husband Michael, and telling him that I no longer knew what my values were. Shortly thereafter, I took my first seminary class – an evening summer intensive in Biblical Hebrew, believe it or not! – and that began the slow and glorious unraveling of my legal career.

Looking back on the past fifteen years, I recognize that I would never have finished seminary – intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, or financially – had it not been for God’s economy of radical grace. There were plenty of times in which I wanted to quit. And, in fact, I did quit – not just once, but twice. The first time was due to the aftermath of the 9-11 bombings of the World Trade Center. The second time was due to dealing with my father’s prolonged death from cancer. The fact that I ultimately returned and finished is not so much a testament to me or my own works, but rather to my family, my friends, my loved ones, my faith and seminary communities, and God – all of whom stuck by me when there was no rational reason to do so.

And I suspect the same is true for each of you. I don’t think it’s possible to get through seminary without experiencing – and benefitting from – the unmerited and unearned love that is God’s grace – a love that gives without expecting anything in return, a love that lends without expecting repayment, and a love that is pressed down, shaken together, and running over.

We are called by God to live out an economy of radical grace, not because we expect something in return, but because we have *already* experienced that radical grace ourselves. We are able to love others in the world precisely because we have *already* been loved – in the classroom, in the chapel, in the library, in the refectory, in spiritual direction, in our field ed sites (although for some that may be hard to see), in our homes, and, yes, even online in an Adobe Connect virtual classroom.

In the end, I believe that God’s economy as articulated in today’s gospel is actually more real than the economy of the “real world.” Because radical grace is what gets us through the tough times. In fact, it’s hard for me to imagine anything that is more

real – or, in the words of Deuteronomy, anything that is nearer or closer to our mouths and hearts.

So, returning to the question posed in Deuteronomy, are the teachings from today’s lessons “too hard” for you? Having known each of you – and having witnessed first-hand the amazing things that you have accomplished during your time at EDS – I can say with confidence that, no, this is not too hard for you.

Let me close by acknowledging that I personally have a hard time with saying goodbyes. As such, it’s been helpful for me to recognize that graduations are not just about endings, but also about beginnings. In fact, graduations are called “commencements” because they are about “commencing,” or beginning, a new phase of one’s life.

My prayer and encouragement for each of you, as you begin your post-seminary lives, is to think back to the glorious events of this week whenever your hearts may be weighed down by the challenges of “real world” economics, and to remember the radical grace of God’s economy that got you through EDS.

Love as you have been loved. Lend as you have been lent. Give as you have been given. Never forget about God’s love that is a good measure: pressed down, shaken together, and running over. And never forget about God’s radical economy of grace, a strange and beautiful economy that will carry you through the rest of your days – and beyond.

+Amen.