

## *In Service of Home Economics*

Sermon by Rev. Hannah Petrie

March 30, 2008

In five days, forty years ago, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed in Memphis, TN. While he is most often credited for his leadership in the civil rights movement, it is often forgotten that Dr. King courageously denounced the war in Vietnam, regardless of offending his ally, President Johnson, and those who thought he should focus only on Civil Rights.

Dr. King wanted the country to focus on our home, not some far-flung foreign country. All of his objectives for justice had to do with making a better home for all Americans, especially the poor. Dr. King had to speak out against the war because it was in the way of these goals. As the country threw its resources into war, hopeful domestic policies aimed at alleviating poverty were forgotten.

In honor of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dr. King's assassination, I also want to focus on our home, and on domestic economics. At the five-year anniversary of another far-flung war, how do we empower a healing economics?

Economics is absolutely a spiritual topic. We depend on a moral blueprint for a moral economic theory, by which our society can operate and thrive. Every day we hear about our teetering economy, but the media boil it down to numbers, as classical economic theory has conditioned us to do. The everyday media won't touch the values and assumptions that have brought us to where we are today.

The root word of "economics" is the same as the root of "ecology" - it's about how best to make our home. Eco means home. What makes a good home? Shall our lives serve greed, or generosity? Who is empowered, the few or the many? Shall our lives serve money, or shall money serve the lives of the many?

The best economics is one that takes these questions about home into consideration. How can we make a humane and proud home for people of good will? What do we serve? How are we to live?

I'm not an economist, so I'm about to speak in the broadest terms. The assumptions of today's economic theory rely heavily on market fundamentalism. The central assumption is we should be serving profits. Self-interest and the free market are given free reign. Maximizing is the name of the game: we want to maximize utility, growth, income, production and, of course, consumption. The quality of life is measured by the ability to consume.

It's easy to understand how, for corporations, the consumer society is a marketing dream come true, with low product durability, built-in-obsolescence, rapidly changing fashions, fads, and advertising media in every household, all dependent upon cheap, fossil fuel energy. Powerful vested interests gain money and control by keeping the economic system unchanged and running full steam ahead. This requires ever greater throughput of materials and energy as if there were no physical reality, limited resources, or laws of thermodynamics.\*

Calamities such as a changing climate, pollution, and depleted resources are viewed as "negative externalities." But if we're here to serve profits, that's logical thinking.

---

\* This paragraph is a direct quotation lifted from Clive L. Spash's article, "The Economics of Avoiding Action on Climate Change", in *Adbusters* magazine (#75), which has no page numbers.

Please see the US editions of *Adbusters* magazine issues # 75 and 76, January/February 2008 and March/April 2008. Edited by Kalle Lasn, produced in Vancouver, Canada. Much of this sermon's content is inspired by the several economics articles in each issue.

But growth cannot continue forever on a non-growing planet. Humans are not better off the more they consume.

It all grows from our deep assumptions about what we should be serving. And according to Tom Green, an ecological economist, there is a growing will to debate fundamental assumptions. He says,

“There is a widely shared yearning for a new kind of economics. An economics that isn’t surprised by global warming, an economics that isn’t sexist, that understands humans in all their complexity, an economics that focuses on the economy as a vehicle to improve human wellbeing rather than humans as cogs to expand the economy ever further.”

The folks who came to hear Jim Hightower speak this past Tuesday in our pulpit share this yearning. Hightower is the male Molly Ivins of Texas. His new book is called *Swim Against the Current / Even a Dead Fish Can Go with the Flow*. It’s about ordinary people who are redefining business success for themselves, and are making sure they are a cog on a vehicle of economic progress that all Americans can feel good about. It’s about holding different assumptions.

Hightower calls the late economist Milton Friedman the patron saint of self-absorbed CEOs. He says Friedman once asked himself a question: Do corporate executives, provided they stay within the law, have responsibilities in their business activities other than to make as much money for their stockholders as possible?

Of course the answer to his own question was, ‘no, they do not!’ Hightower is quick to point out that,

“Friedman was being disingenuous when he tossed in the little prophylactic phrase, ‘provided they stay within the law.’ Come on professor . . . Did he not know that we know that corporate executives and lobbyists buy the law, write the law, bend it, twist it, pervert it, slice-dice-grate-and-grind it finer than a Ronco Veg-O-Matic?” Hightower says “Most laws governing corporate behavior are weaker than Canadian hot sauce and rarely enforced.”

Hightower is making light of worrisome offenses – but humor in this area is a good sign. Humor indicates healing, and an awakening willingness to do something about it. We are all beginning to wake up; most of us are ready for a new kind of economics, one that can be true to its root meaning, and help us turn our world back into a home.

Hightower can be serious too, and prophetic. He says, “breaking the corporate bonds is the twenty-first century’s paramount struggle for the democratic soul of America . . . corporate interests have now seized control of our politics and government, work and leisure . . . our very lives and our sense of well-being.”

And it is that sense of well-being that I want to home in on. A few pages later Hightower further defines this, in contrast to the old economics. “By defining business in the narrowest terms of global corporate interests, we sublimate all else to their bottom line, leaving only incidental room for the multiple goals of our community, including:

- Time for family and friends
- Personal satisfaction of workers
- Encouragement of creativity
- Promotion of discourse
- Welcoming of dissent
- Building of strong, local relationships
- Good stewardship
- . . . and dare we add,
- Fun

Laughter

The pursuit of happiness

A sense of shared purpose and belonging

A feeling of being respected and valued (and finally)

The common good

This is a good beginning list of the features that a new economics would allow for, even if it too excludes the environmental “externalities.” Whatever we might call this new economics, whether it be 7<sup>th</sup> generation economics, healthy-boundaries economics, realistic economics, common sense or common good economics, its defining feature is that it will loosen the corporate grip on our government, environment, and culture.

The first noticeable difference would especially be in our culture, and how we define well-being. So many of us are already waking up to the fact that more is so not more. We’re already getting good at not letting corporations define our tastes, our wants and our needs.

But what about this sense of shared purpose and belonging? What about the building of strong, local relationships and good stewardship? The best of our corporate leaders – which is the vast majority of them -- have all these same feelings and sensitivities. They have the same compassion and yearning for a better home that the rest of us do. The best among them are our allies, not our enemies.

What they need, what we all need, are simple ways to get some physical and emotional experience serving more wholesome and humane values. That’s why it’s important to engage in service events like Big Neighborhood Saturday that reflect the attitude of a new economics. Obviously a new economic foundation isn’t going to strike the American imagination overnight. But as Dr. King’s influence, Gandhi, encouraged people, in the meantime we can be the change we want to see in the world.

If we’re thinking about making a home here, we wouldn’t think twice about whether or not to participate in such an event. Lending a hand toward the infrastructural improvements of a public school would be the modern equivalent of an Amish barn-raising. Of course we’d all want to be there, we wouldn’t miss such a big community event.

Don’t think about the activities of Big Sunday as some kind of grand hand-out or showy charitable event for which we can feel puffed up. Let’s let the corporate sponsors take that kind of credit – because they are the ones paying for it. Yes, there is that irony – it is corporate sponsors who are providing the monies for the paint, the materials, the plants, the equipment. It is corporate dollars that support the amazing work of the Big Sunday organization, who mobilized over 50,000 volunteers last year on one weekend to make the greater Los Angeles area a better place. Corporate aims are not all misguided, in fact, quite the contrary. Corporations can be our allies. We need to see them as such and urge them to be allies in the noble efforts of making a community a decent home. Corporations are in an excellent position to be in service of home economics.

So the sponsors can and should feel good about sponsoring. But for us, May 3<sup>rd</sup> is about everyone working together. It’s about spending time with people in our local community, and spending time with each other; more than anything, it’s about mutual community building, and demonstrating that such a thing is important to us. As David said, it is a real gift to provide a community event in communities that may not often have them.

At some point, we have to reject the cultural lifestyles that keep us isolated from each other, a lifestyle that is a product of a culture of products. We can let the quality of life be measured by our ability to consume, or we might insist it be measured by how easily we get to work with others. Or by the quality of our relationships that are close to home, yet beyond our private homes. Life might be measured by fun and laughter, and how often we experience a shared purpose with people we usually wouldn’t share anything with. Which do you think will help us make a better home?

Dr. King viewed this kind of values-shift as essential to disempowering a war-serving economy. Forty-one years ago, on April 4th, exactly one year before his death, he gave a long anti-war speech in New York City. It's probably his least well-known speech. Here are excerpts:

"I wish to go on now to say something even more disturbing. The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit...

Increasingly... this is the role our nation has taken -- the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investment.

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered."

Getting on the right side of the world revolution begins at home, in choosing to serve a different set of values in our everyday lives. For those of you who have already filled out your pledge card, you've already made that choice. You've invested in the kind of profits that feed the many, not just you. Neighborhood Church is in the business of externalizing its profits in countless ways – by being the home for events that feed the larger community. Often the use of our space is a donation. If you ever want to get an idea of how many good things your pledge supports, well beyond what you get out of it, just take a look at the campus directory, on any given week.

Our church home extends beyond the boundaries of campus, too. We can strengthen this claim when a substantial number of us participate in Big Neighborhood Saturday. Let us find shared purpose and enlarge our neighborhood by building strong local relationships – let us make the shift to Dr. King's "'person-oriented' society."

Some would call that helping to create the kingdom of heaven. I know Dr. King would have. Jesus believed the kingdom of heaven – the most loving and humane world – was always potentially right here among and within us, and would exist as soon as we saw and treated ourselves and all others as what we most truly are: the children of God, still wondering how to work, how to play and love together: how to make a home.