

“Is the Market Moral?”

Amos 8;4-7; Luke 16:1-13

Then Jesus **said to the disciples**, *“There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. ²So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’ ³Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’ ⁵So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ ⁶He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ ⁷Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ ⁸And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. ⁹And (turning to the crowds), Jesus said, *I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. ¹⁰“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? ¹³No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”**

When Starbucks introduced the pumpkin spice latte (PSL) to select test markets in the fall of 2003 it was an instant hit. Since then the PSL has inspired a deluge of products, and its appearance in coffeeshops has become a seasonal event. Step into an American grocery store and you’ll find pumpkin spice dog food, yogurt, cookies, beer, candles, deodorant, ice cream, seltzer, and yes, pie.

The blend of warm spices like cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, and allspice has become a trend-defying powerhouse, throwing an elbow to salted caramel, and stepping on elderflower’s delicate toes. It’s delicious, ubiquitous, and in many cases, eye-roll inducing—*pumpkin spice Spam, anyone?*

\$600 million: Estimated worth of the “pumpkin spice industrial complex” in 2018.

In 2019, Starbucks rolled out the PSL on Aug. 27, nearly a month before the official start of autumn on Sept. 23. Dunkin’ Donuts started the season even earlier.¹

This is capitalism at its best—or worst—depending on your perspective.

I think this is interesting because in our daily newspapers (print or electronic!), reports about *religion* appear a long distance from the business pages. Religion is often defined as a realm *far removed* from the concerns of “*this world*” that it is assumed to have little of practical value to offer on trade and commerce, wages and dividends, investment and reward. We expect churches, synagogues, and mosques to have much to say about personal behavior, about matters related to family and sexuality, about interpersonal dealings and individual spiritual yearnings. But if the discussion is about profits and losses, religious voices are supposed to fall silent.

This view, of course, is absurd. It is untrue to *history*—religious traditions have always had much to teach us about the moral underpinnings of economic systems and the practical rules for making an economy good and just.

It is also untrue to *human nature*—if religions teach us that we are supposed to be moral in all our actions, there is no special exemption for activities in the economic sphere. We are not supposed to lie, cheat, or steal, and we are supposed to love our neighbor. If such rules do not apply to economic life, they are meaningless.

And it is untrue to the actual workings of any society to say that religious voices can be heard on family life, but not on the economic underpinnings of the family; on personal responsibility, but not on the responsibility of economic actors; on generosity of the spirit, but not on the corporal and economic works of mercy.

For example, Rebecca Blank, a respected economist at the University of Michigan (she is Dean of the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy) and an active Presbyterian layperson (FPC Ann Arbor) says that “*we are both economic and spiritual creatures.*”

¹ Stacy Conradt, *Pumpkin Spice Latte*, Quartz Obsession, September 20, 2019

And she captures the ambiguities of market outcomes well when she insists that (markets) are “*not either good or bad; more frequently, they are **both** good and bad.*” She continues: “*Markets can enrich the lives of some who were previously poor while excluding others; markets also can generate new jobs and encourage the development of new human talents, even while they displace or disempower others whose skills are no longer as useful.*”

“*The role of the church,*” Blank writes at another point, “*is not to be ‘anti-market’ or ‘pro-market,’ but life-affirming. In those cases in which markets and incentives promote better life opportunities, the church should affirm this, but when the market limits opportunity and creates human misery, the church must call the market to judgment and open a conversation about alternative institutions and social responses to the problem.*”²

With this in mind, I want you to consider how something as *seemingly innocuous* as *municipal boundaries* can warp markets by enriching some and depriving others.

Travel with me (in your minds) to *Grosse Pointe, Michigan* (a community adjacent to Detroit)—which is representative of hundreds of similar communities throughout the United States.

You see, Grosse Pointe, is the place where a young woman named *Crystal Bailey* played in the park when she was a girl, joined the cheer team, and founded her predominantly white high school’s first Black student union. And then there’s Detroit, just a few miles down the road—where the suburban streets choke off into dead ends, the vacant lots begin, and the predominant *whiteness* ends.

Bailey left Grosse Pointe utterly disenchanted in 2016, the year her white classmates went viral for scrawling the N word on their stomachs at a party. Now 21 years old, Bailey is studying strategic communications at Hampton University, a historically Black college in Virginia. When she came back home to the lakeside Michigan town in May, she drove her car to that stark line—*Alter Road*, the border

² Rebecca M. Blank and William McGurn, *Is the Market Moral? A Dialogue on Religion, Economics & Justice*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 2004, pp. 3, 4

where the wealthy suburbs cordon themselves off from one of the poorest cities in America—to define it, again.

“This is actually like, terrible now. This is Grosse Pointe,” she says in a cell phone video, pointing her camera to the passenger side of her car, toward manicured lawns and a dead end blocking passage into the suburbs. She pivots back to the driver-side window, toward the border’s overgrown grass. *“And this is Detroit.”*

For decades, Grosse Pointe has proudly served as an idyllic enclave for Michigan’s *yuppie class* living along the heart-shaped *Lake St. Clair*. Composed of five so-called “Pointes”—*Shores, Woods, Farms, City, and Park*—the region is also an enduring reminder of metro Detroit’s legacy of segregation. The suburb’s desire to wall off Detroit entirely still manifests on *Alter Road*.

While Grosse Pointe Park is among the closest suburbs to Detroit, it shares nearly none of the city’s characteristics. The town of 11,000 is nearly 86 percent white, compared with Detroit, which is 79 percent Black. Nearly 38 percent of Detroiters live in poverty, compared with 6.4 percent of residents in Grosse Pointe Park. Grosse Pointe’s pastel trim ends at the Detroit border, where skeletal homes sit vacant between crumbling sidewalks and empty lots. A few miles past the border, *gentrification* picks up again and melts into Detroit’s Midtown district.

But the divisions were manufactured, in large part, by white people. For example, in 1945 the *Grosse Pointe Brokers Association* secretly adopted a practice called the “point system,” which blocked people of color from purchasing homes in the suburbs and made it nearly impossible for Jews to live in the area by grading them on their overall “*desirability*.” This went on until 1960. When the suburb’s first Black residents finally moved in, they were met by “*carloads of jeering whites hurling racial insults*,” according to the *New York Times*.

“End of point system or not, there were still people who were doing their best to enforce racial exclusion,” said Ross Eisenbrey, a former vice president of the Economic Policy Institute and a Grosse Pointe Park native.

Sae’Vonne Williams, a 27-year-old designer, wanted to move to Grosse Pointe Park from Detroit because *“it’s so clean over here and pretty,”* she said.

But after her lease is up, she's probably getting out. The town is so white that she can recall specific instances where she saw another Black person on her street. That doesn't necessarily bother her, but it can feel awkward, she said. Then there's the fact that her street near the border is a collection of densely packed flats. She heard that's where Black domestic workers used to live to cater to the rich white people living along the water.

"I see that line," she said. "One street over, it's like big houses right down the street from me. The houses get really big, huge."³

Which brings us to today's parable.

(Remember) in the parable, Jesus is talking to the *disciples*. But he is also surrounded by others, whom Luke refers to as *tax collectors, sinners, and Pharisees*. *This is part of a sermon series of sorts **about money, doing right with it, and getting a second chance to do right when you haven't***. Imagine hearing this right after the prodigal son parable, and it makes a lot more sense. Jesus talks to the crowd, pauses, talks to his disciples, and in *verse 9* talks to the crowd again.

"Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth," he says. In other words: *If you've been dishonest thus far, use what you've gained to do some good*. He's **not** telling disciples to be dishonest; *this is a sermon for the dishonest already among them*. The dishonest manager isn't praised because he becomes dishonest; *he is praised because he finally figures out how to do some good for his boss*. It is his decision **to change** that is of note here—the same as it was in the prodigal son parable just before.

In our time this might sound like, *Do some good, you dishonest people, even if it means you have to take a loss to finally get on the right track*. Who might Jesus be speaking to today? Can the folks who foisted the housing bubble and ensuing crash on our economy hear this with contrite hearts? Is what Jesus is asking of them really that difficult? It's a moment in which Jesus offers a coda of care and

³ Emma Ockerman, *Municipal Borders Have a Huge Impact on Millions of People's Daily Lives*, Vice Magazines **Borders** Issue, September 19, 2019

concern for those who have actively exploited people. As believers, can we offer that same compassion?

It's clear the audience of *Amos 8* would have appreciated a little tenderness from their prophet. But after all of their *exploitation of the poor—strategic exploitation*, going as far as to calculate for their best return—Amos is having none of it. "*Hear this*" is less "*hear ye, hear ye!*" and more like a *sage matriarch* sitting you down to tell you what a knucklehead you've been. "*Surely I will never forget any of their deeds,*" says Amos, transposing YHWH's voice in the first person—it's some scary stuff. And whereas Jesus takes a more poetic route, Amos leaves nothing to the imagination.⁴

Friends, *both approaches* are **useful** and **necessary** as we endure a form of capitalism that (sometimes) operates *with less and less moral vision*. We need the type of *prophetic leadership* that **Jesus** and **Amos** offer here—to *speak directly to systems and people that deny and subjugate others, to remind them of their power and their privilege and their responsibility to God and God's people*. All money is **not** dishonest, and all *dishonest money* can be made **honest again**. This is the truth of God carried across thousands of years.

⁴ Julian DeShazier, *September 22/Ordinary 25C*, The Christian Century, August 27th, 2019

