

I. Advanced organizer -

A. One of the first times I remember getting really frustrated with my husband, came not long after our wedding. We'd been given by some of our wedding guests a number of board games, no doubt with the idea that playing these games would stimulate fun and a positive connection between us that would help solidify and deepen our new union. **Whoever thought this clearly has never played Monopoly.**

1. Now I was at a distinct disadvantage when we opened up the Parker Brothers game because I had never played it growing up. Jason, however, had played it as a kid, so he understood how it worked and what the goals were. And before long, he was raking in the dough, taking clear advantage of his understanding of the game, while I was still trying to figure out the rules. He secured the best properties, as he was supposed to do. His fortune grew and grew while I was driven to bankruptcy. Jason won fair and square, exactly as the game wanted him too. And I got to admit, it made me pretty cranky. If the hope by our friends who gave us the game was that game night would turn into a romantic night, that hope majorly backfired. It took me days to get over my hurt of having been so royally screwed, and I'm not sure we ever pulled that game out of the closet again.

B. An article in the New York Times magazine this week started with this little anecdote:

1. *A couple of years before he was convicted of securities fraud, Martin Shkreli was the chief executive of a pharmaceutical company that acquired the rights to Daraprim, a lifesaving antiparasitic drug. Previously the drug cost \$13.50 a pill, but in Shkreli's hands, the price quickly increased by a factor of 56, to \$750 a pill. At a health care conference, Shkreli told the audience that he should have raised the price even higher. "No one wants to say it, no one's proud of it," he explained. "But this is a capitalist society, a capitalist system and capitalist rules."*

2. I bet Martin Shkreli is great at playing Monopoly.

3. "It's a capitalist society" is a mantra many of us have heard in some fashion throughout our life. I presume, for most of us, some version of capitalism is all we've ever known. If we've studied economics, work in finance, or corporate management, we may have a deep understanding of how market economies function. But many of us don't; we simply accept capitalism in some sense as a given, and with that perhaps we accept a cynical reality that in a capitalist world some people will make a killing, just because they can.

C. **Well, we're coming towards the end of our series on *Smashing Idols*** - a series in which I've been positing that the human constructs that shape our thinking and cause us to prioritize some points of view over others, that these are actually our own contemporary version of what our ancient ancestors dealt with in the form of idols. We invest ourselves in them and as we are shaped by them, our view of reality is distorted, even distorting our view of God.

D. Today, for the last idol we're considering, **we're turning the lens toward this framework of capitalism**, considering together how or why that might function as an idol, and if so, what we might do about it.

E. Now I will say, while I've been doing a fair amount of research on this topic, I want to clearly acknowledge that **I'm not an expert when it comes to economic policy**. I'm not an economist or a political theorist or a financial planner, I'm a pastor. So my questions aren't primarily about what are the best views on how markets work or what are all the best public policies or political systems we should be pushing for. I'm interested in what is the effect of living in a capitalist society on the pursuit of faith? How does it impact our understanding of the Divine? And what might we do if we find those things don't align?

II. (A Capitalist Economy)

- A. For those of us who, like me, aren't economic or government experts, it might be helpful to review what "Capitalism" even means. Essentially capitalism in its most simple description is an **economic system that allows private individuals and companies to make most of the economic decisions, and own most of the property, while the government plays a secondary role**. These individuals and companies control the means of production for goods to be produced and sold for profit. Capitalism assumes a free market economy, in which goods and services are distributed, according to the laws of supply and demand.
1. So when something is produced, it's the person who owns the machine or the capital, rather than the worker who works it, who gets the control of the profits. In theory, the owner, or you could say "the capitalist", has to pay a fair wage and allow the worker to work under fair conditions, or the worker could choose to work somewhere else for another employer who will pay him or her better. That's how the labor market is supposed to function: a supply and demand balance in labor.
 2. In the same way, the owner has the right to sell the product for whatever people are willing to pay for it, and if this capitalist can sell it for more than he or she spent to make it, he or she can keep the profit. Once again, supply and demand are key. The fewer there are of something, the higher the demand, and often the more that can be charged.
 3. **Proponents of capitalism often like to talk about capitalism in terms of freedom**. In recent decades, they might point to economists like Milton Friedman, who argued that economic freedom was needed for political freedom. Friedman believed the government should intervene as little as possible in the economy, letting the "free market" determine how money is best exchanged. The idea is that with this freedom, some people will be motivated to work really hard because they can really prosper, and as they do, the economy grows faster and everyone benefits. **"A rising tide lifts all boats" is a saying that some with this view celebrate.**
 4. Often folks who celebrate the freedom of capitalism do so by contrasting it with some form of socialism. Now socialism is a broad umbrella term that can look like a lot of different models, but usually when free-market capitalists use it to contrast with capitalism, they have in mind an extreme version of socialism, perhaps even the far-end of the socialist spectrum, "communism" in which a totalitarian government holds tight control over how things are produced. "Look at their lack of freedom!" the capitalists will say. What motivation do you have to work hard if you won't enjoy the spoils of your labor?
 5. **But the "freedom" that capitalists seem to celebrate; what kind of freedom is it? And for whom?**
 - a) Maybe they're the freedoms that you and I might enjoy: freedom to purchase things that we find valuable. Freedom to pursue an education, discern a career that suits us and provides for us and our families. Freedom to own a home we can live in and pass down to our children. Freedom to invest a bit of our money in entities we believe in. Freedom to start our own companies, and who knows, perhaps that company might be the next multi-billion dollar corporation, bringing value into the world? **There's much to this kind of freedom that's positive, and harkens back to the democratic ideal of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.**
 - b) But for capitalism, in its most raw "free market" form to function, **these freedoms I just referenced are not the primary motivators**. These are positive side effects, at most. **The ultimate goal of capitalism is to enrich the capitalist**. To provide maximum freedom in the market for the person who is fortunate enough, smart

enough, or perhaps ruthless enough to grow their capital investment. To make their capital turn a financial profit, whatever the effect it has on others.

- c) That New York Times article I referenced at the beginning is by Princeton sociology professor Matthew Desmond, and it describes the origins of American capitalism historically, and how many of the business practices we've seen developed in the United States, the practices that are the cogs and wheels in our American capitalism machine, were developed first and foremost on the Southern plantation, where the product being mass produced was cotton, and the primary form of capital was the ownership of human beings.
- d) **No doubt, if you were a plantation landowner, you had the freedom to do remarkably well for yourself.** Right before the Civil War, the Mississippi Valley was home to more millionaires per capita than anywhere else in the United States. But at what cost? What "freedom" was there for the Native Populations who saw millions of acres of their land expropriated by the US government, and then sold on the cheap to white settlers and land speculators? What "freedom" was there for the land itself that within a generation saw its rich resources utterly depleted? What "freedom" was there truly for the poor white day laborer, whose work was insecure, whose wages were depressed, whose kids also needed to work for meager provision, but whose only comfort and sense of freedom came from the small consolation that at least they weren't enslaved in bondage?
- e) And of course, most crucially, what freedom was there for the enslaved laborers themselves whose bodies were brutalized, while their value and the value of their children were catalogued on balance sheets, and traded freely on the open market, even using human lives as collateral to secure mortgages that would permit wealthy capitalists to purchase more human lives?
- f) Desmond describes this original version of capitalism in this brutal way:
 - (1) *The cotton plantation was America's first big business, and the nation's first corporate Big Brother was the overseer. And behind every cold calculation, every rational fine-tuning of the system, violence lurked. Plantation owners used a combination of incentives and punishments to squeeze as much as possible out of enslaved workers.....*
The violence was neither arbitrary nor gratuitous. It was rational, capitalistic, all part of the plantation's design. "Each individual having a stated number of pounds of cotton to pick," a formerly enslaved worker, Henry Watson, wrote in 1848, "the deficit of which was made up by as many lashes being applied to the poor slave's back."
- g) The "freedom" that American capitalism has long celebrated has always come at a horrific cost. **The core freedom that capitalism, particularly the American brand, left to its own devices, supports is the freedom to exploit.** The freedom to oppress. The freedom to enrich yourself, whatever the consequences are on anyone else.
- h) This distorted freedom for those with the most capital has evolved since the era of the plantation, but **the fundamental problem persists.** Today income inequality in the United States is at mind-bending levels. **The richest 1 percent of Americans own 40 percent of the country's wealth, while 40% of the American population can't afford a \$400 emergency expense.** Medical expenses cost people their homes and send people to bankruptcy. Jobs are shipped overseas to places with less worker protections. Meanwhile immigrants are lured across our border by corporations who want to exploit their precarious legal position so they can keep the wages low, but

have no interest in protecting them when ICE comes calling. Those who are winning the monopoly game are happy to invest their winnings into political contributions that ensure that those in government work with them rather than against them, so that together the political class and the financial class can shape the rules of game that favor more and more power in the hands of fewer and fewer people. **This is the sick freedom of capitalism today.**

III. In the New Testament, there's a story of Jesus encountering a person of wealth in his day. Mark tells the story this way:

A. **17 Now as Jesus was starting out on his way, someone ran up to him, fell on his knees, and said, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'" 20 The man said to him, "Teacher, I have wholeheartedly obeyed all these laws since my youth." 21 As Jesus looked at him, he felt love for him and said, "You lack one thing. Go, sell whatever you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." 22 But at this statement, the man looked sad and went away sorrowful, for he was very rich. (Mark 10:17-22)**

1. Here in this story, I believe Jesus is calling out the **fallacy of freedom** that comes in any economic system where the accumulation of wealth is the heart of the matter. This ruler may genuinely desire connection with the divine, he may desire to wholeheartedly honor God, obeying every commandment. He wants eternal life. But as Jesus highlights in his challenge to him, this desire has always been on this man's terms. As he practiced the commandments, he maintained his "freedom" to accumulate and possess. To pursue security for himself and his family.
2. But that security has come at a cost. This freedom is a false freedom. This man is not free to embrace a different economic vision, one that is closer to the heart of the divine. He is not truly free to join this Jesus who looks to him with love and compassion. The cost is too high. He is captive to his own success. His heart has been captured by wealth. He does not feel the freedom to do what Jesus is asking of him, and so he walks away sad and sorrowful. Perhaps this conflict in the man is what Jesus was referring to, when he said in his Sermon on the Mount, **"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." (Matthew 6:24)**
3. An idol, as classically understood, is a false god; something we invest our worship in that keeps us from connecting with a truer, deeper ultimate reality. In this story, this man is conflicted. He cannot serve two masters. He has to walk away from this invitation to eternal union with the God over all creation, the God who has more than enough abundance and wants to share it with God's children generously, so he can maintain control over his little empire. **This man walks away because he is captive to an idol, an idol that I believe is still very much with us and is at the heart of what we've come to know as capitalism.**
4. Friends, **this idol doesn't just impact the wealthiest among us:** those secular Wall Street fat cats who have no ethical bones in their bodies. This idol **whispers to the brilliant idealists at our best universities** who enter Ivy League halls with the hopes of changing the world, but five years later find themselves **using their brilliant minds to speculate with other people's money rather than discovering the cure to cancer.** The

idol encourages young tech entrepreneurs to pitch “disruptive ideas” that will enrich themselves and their investors **without thinking too deeply about the implications of their disruptions; just because you can collect and sell a user’s data, doesn’t mean you should.**

5. And grievously, the **idol certainly impacts our churches as they too bow to the consumerism of a capitalist society:** whether that means setting up a Starbucks in the church lobby or preaching a gospel that promises health and wealth from God if you simply click the donate button. What I think is most problematic is **when the church is unable to speak prophetically because it has to serve the idol of the bottom line.** In a consumer world, if you speak truth to power, power can always take their check to the church down the street. In recent years I’ve come to know of many respected pastors, scholars, and authors whose views on LGBTQ inclusion have evolved. They personally can no longer justify their exclusion from the church. But the financial cost to these Christian leaders or the little church empires they’ve built feels too high should they say this out loud, and **so sadly, they, like the young ruler in the story have to walk away from Jesus’ invitation to sell it all and join what he is doing.**

- B. **So what is this alternative economic vision that Jesus’ upside down kingdom would have people embrace?** What is the view regarding how resources are distributed that he and the Jewish tradition he emerges from would teach? If Jesus might have identified an idol at the heart of the capitalist tradition, what was he trying to call people into instead? This is a big question. Truthfully, economics are a major theme throughout the Scriptures, with more passages than we can deeply explore here. But I think it’s worth taking a bit of time to look at some highlights, because they give us a broader context for what Jesus was naming when he called that rich man to sell his possessions and give them away. That broader context may also give us a sense of what a less idolatrous economy might look like.

IV. (A Kingdom Economy)

- A. In the Hebrew Bible we have a couple of themes to look to. There is certainly a tradition in some places of seeing economic flourishing as a sign of divine favor. Particularly if we look to the early stories of people like the Patriarchs - folks like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - who in their agrarian society see their flocks and lands prosper and understand that prosperity to be a blessing. But perhaps even more consistently as the scriptures progress, we see God’s heart for those who are oppressed by the consolidation of wealth and political power that happens as social systems develop. When the Hebrew people are crying out to God as slaves in Egypt, God’s heart is moved to bring them liberation.
- B. And as that God releases the captives and gives them a code of their own to live by, the Divine includes a priority for the poor and powerless. Here’s just one of many examples from the laws given to Moses.

1. ***14 You must not oppress a lowly and poor servant, whether one from among your fellow Israelites or from the resident foreigners who are living in your land and villages. 15 You must pay his wage that very day before the sun sets, for he is poor and his life depends on it. Otherwise he will cry out to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin....Whenever you reap your harvest in your field and leave some unranked grain there, you must not return to get it; it should go to the resident foreigner, orphan, and widow so that the Lord your God may bless all the work you do. ... Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt; therefore, I am commanding you to do all this. (Deut. 24:14-15, 19,22)***

2. So here we see **God inviting his followers to care for one another, to love their neighbors as much as themselves, and to make the poor a priority.** God recognizes that some will be landowners and some day laborers. But **this God does not want those who are in the position of power to exploit those who work for them.** The workers should be paid on time for their work. God also wants those who have more to care for those who have less, so God instructs them to leave some of their harvest for immigrants, orphans, widows, all those who are at a disadvantage. **Elsewhere God even makes provisions for the release of debt, through the institution of the Year of Jubilee.** Every 50 years, all the debts are forgiven and there is massive redistribution of property and land so that generations of inequality do not entrench and persist.
3. These themes continue throughout the Hebrew Bible, with the prophets often speaking out when they see the powerful ignoring these guidelines.

C. And then we come to the gospels and the life of Jesus.

1. The world Jesus comes into is one of **great economic inequality.** Remember, at this time, Israel was under Roman occupation, and in that set up, there were essentially two classes: the very rich and the very poor. The **very rich was a small amount of the people, no more than 5% of the population, and included Roman bureaucrats, wealthy priests, a handful of landowners and tax collectors.** The rich young ruler we met in Mark 10 was part of this small class. But the rest of the people in Israel were poor, many were destitute, though most of the poor were working poor. **The majority of peasants were subsistence farmers:** they paid heavy taxes to Rome as well as extra religious taxes that went to the priests: estimates are likely 40% they paid in taxes, and then they hoped they could live off the rest. Often they couldn't make ends meet if the crop yield was bad and so the poor would borrow from the wealthy to pay their taxes, but this was often a vicious cycle. When the peasants defaulted on their loans, they were often forced to sell themselves or their children into slavery.
2. **In this context it is notable how the divine chooses to be revealed.** God does not choose to be born as a wealthy landowner or a priest who is living high off religious taxes. Jesus comes born to poor peasants, lives the life of a peasant, and identifies himself as one who has come to bring freedom and liberation to those in poverty. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has a big coming out moment where he announces who he truly is and what he has come to do, as he reads from the scroll of Isaiah:
 - a) ***"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and the regaining of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*(Luke 4:18-19)**
 - (1) The year of the Lord's favor is another way of talking about the year of Jubilee, a practice which had long since been abandoned in Israel, but here Jesus is announcing that his identity is one of restoring justice to the vulnerable who've been taken advantage, wiping debts clean, turning the economy upside down.
3. Jesus' identity with the poor continues throughout his ministry as he preaches ***"Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God belongs to you."* (Luke 6:20).** In the prayer he teaches his followers to pray, he centers a prayer for daily bread, as well as a release from debts, a term that has more of an economic implication than a moral one.

4. He famously chastises the merchants and money changers who have set-up shop in the Jewish temple, even taking direct action as he overturns their tables, and chases them out of the temple courts for turning God's house of prayer into a den of robbers.
5. And then of course, towards the end of his life Jesus names that his identification with the poor goes so deep that he recognizes support for them to be equivalent with support for himself. Describing a moment of final reckoning Jesus says this: **34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'**

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

40 "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' (Matthew 25:34-40)

6. Clearly Jesus cared about and identified with the poor, and he expected his followers to do the same. **Jesus was calling them into an alternative kingdom, with an economy that wasn't held up by systems of inequality, but that invited cooperation and communal care.** And the earliest Jesus followers, after his death, resurrection, and the sending of the Spirit, **felt called to live that out in practical ways.** This is what we see embodied in the earliest version of the church.

a) '32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all 34 that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.' (Acts 4:32-35)

7. Friends, I don't care what anyone has told you. **Jesus is not a capitalist.** No; Jesus has a very different economic vision. It's a vision that understands **that there may be difference in terms of economic station, but that expects cooperative community care in the midst of that reality.** It's a vision that **doesn't hold personal freedom over freedom of the neighbor.** It's a vision that **celebrates justice and not oppression, and expects that those who have more should attend to and share with those who have less, seeing them not as unworthy of concern, but as the revealers of God's own self.**

- V. **So if we believe that this economic vision is the vision that we, as Jesus followers, are called to embody, how do we live into that vision in the midst of a capitalist economy that doesn't share our core calling?** This is the challenge, isn't it? It's a big question, and admittedly one that we can't answer exhaustively this morning. But I'd like to end with a few suggestions that might help us take some first steps in wrestling this through.

- A. First, I think we need to **invite the work of the Spirit to give us greater insight about the ways that our investment in this capitalist economy keep us from more freely participating in Jesus' economic vision.**
1. I don't think any of us will ever be CEOs of multi-national companies. But that doesn't mean that there aren't ways that parts of our own hearts haven't been given over to that false promise of freedom that capitalism offers. **Where do we find ourselves controlled by this supposed freedom, feeling the need to focus on storing up earthly treasures, rather than feeling truly free to be open-handed with what we've been given?**
 2. Now hear me: I think there's lots of complexity here. I'm not saying that no one should own private property or have a 401k. **I think there's a case from scripture and tradition and wisdom for stewarding our resources well.** Jesus talked about that, as well. And Jesus himself and those who traveled with him were able to live itinerantly because they had benefactors who had means that they stewarded well, and also were willing to share and give away as needed.
 3. So the question is, **to what extent do our investments in our economic states define our identities and motives rather than provide a means for us to live openly, generously, with freedom to respond to the Spirit's prompting to share, rather than squirrel away?** I believe all of us should invite the Spirit's activity into our financial choices. We should seek the Spirit's wisdom as we make our financial choices, not because there is necessarily always one clear right or wrong answer, that we need to discern, but because we recognize we need help in keeping our priorities clear and our hearts aligned as much as possible with the divine heart in the way we handle our money.
- B. **Consider how our places of relative power and privilege present opportunities to work and advocate for greater freedom for all.**
1. Friends, in theory we live in a representative democracy, something that Jesus' followers did not. But there's an argument to be made that capitalism and democracy don't actually go hand in hand, they are diametrically opposed. A core democratic ideal is that every person has a voice. Every politician is subject to constituents who elect them. Each citizen has a vote. But the more the levers of government are controlled by corporate interests, so that the various agencies that have been developed to protect people against the excesses of capitalism are gutted from the inside, making them ineffective, the more that large corporations shape policies rather than the general populations who are affected by them, the more politicians choose a career path that will take them from congress to a high-paying lobbying firm, the less our individual votes really matter.
 2. What we need is more democracy and less capitalism. And so we ask ourselves, how can we organize, how can we give, how can we speak out, how can we participate in our system in a meaningful way, calling our supposedly democratic system to its stated values of liberty and justice for all?
 3. One gift of the last few years is how much of the charade has been exposed, and people are rising up. Activists of all stripes are uniting to say "no", we will not let you take our democracy from us without a fight. There are roles all of us can play in that work.
- C. **Resist cynical fatalism, and invite Jesus to open our imaginations in a hopeful way toward our participation in the redeeming of all things, including our idolatrous systems.**
1. After the rich young ruler walked away, Jesus turned to his followers, saying
 - a) ***"How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" 24 The disciples were astonished at these words. But again Jesus said to them, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of***

a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” 26 They were even more astonished and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” 27 Jesus looked at them and replied, “This is impossible for mere humans, but not for God; all things are possible for God.” (Mark 10:23-27)

2. It is hard to turn from self-interest to cooperative life. It is hard for those whose hearts are captive to the idol to shed that captivity and thread the needle. It is understandable why we, like Jesus’ disciples, might conclude it’s impossible. We have reason to be cynical and fatalistic.
3. But Jesus is inviting us to **hope and believe in a world we’ve not yet seen**; a world that is impossible for mere humans to embody, **but is not impossible for God**. I refuse to resign myself to the only options being cruel capitalism or totalitarian socialism. My faith does not allow me to accept that.
4. This is the gift we as Jesus followers have to give in this cynical moment we find ourselves in. We cannot cave to despair. We have to say, yes, this system is broken. Things are not as they should be. The status quo is not to be tolerated, it’s unacceptable because it offends the heart at the center of the universe. And we follow one who believes we can do better. We partner with Jesus, who reveals a different way to live and a different dream of what freedom looks like.
5. May this be the mission we participate in for as long as we have life to do it. And may the community we embody in this moment here at Haven, and in the communities we participate in around us, testify in their own ways that the idol is not all powerful. Just as the early church modeled an alternative reality, may we live into that prophetic call in our own time, and may we find Jesus in our midst as we do so. May the good news that God hears the cries of the poor and moves to bring liberation and true freedom for all bring hope to a world that desperately needs it. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation:

1. How have you been aware of the role of capitalism in your own life? What benefits have you received from it? What has been costly about it?
2. What feels challenging to you about Jesus’ economic vision? What seems hopeful or encouraging?
3. What might the redeeming of our capitalist system look like?