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The Divine Economy
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This evening we hope to speak a little of the mystery of reality. You might say reality is a mystery because we don't normally know what it is because we are looking at the universe out of eyes that have been thoroughly conditioned to see things a certain way through our inheritance, our capacities, our education, our temperament and our culture. So what we see as reality is filtered through the dark glasses or the tinted glasses or maybe enlarged glasses; maybe you're seeing the world in an exaggerated way rather than from a diminished way. So whatever way you see it, you can be sure that's not it. And that's why it might be fun to speak around the mystery of reality.

As one of the great Episcopal theologians of recent memory said, “God is reality.” Of course, that needs a little explanation, [some] nuancing, but it hits the reality. It hits the truth on the head so to speak. And I thought this evening in that connection it might be fun to talk about the divine economy. You probably, I figure, you'd be happy to hear about any economy besides the one we have! And my sympathy for all of you who are suffering; it's the whole world [that] has come right up against a global economy that isn't working. They hopefully can fix it.

I'd like to say a few words about a different kind of economy that you don't have to fix. It's superb just as it is, and theology, at least some theologies have called it, in fact, the divine economy. And it usually means, in an academic frame of reference, the extraordinary capacity God has of doing everything at the same time. In other words, God doesn't just do a couple of things at the same time. But God is, I think we can safely say in this gathering, that God has set off the creation in an evolutionary context that God guides with great care but with two or three caveats: God doesn't run everything. Why should God? Everything works very well by itself once it's out there. And so there are really three aspects of, or even four that we ought to keep in mind in any evolutionary disagreement or discussion.

And one is that as Christians we believe that creation is expressing itself in evolution insofar as evolution can be scientifically established, and it has quite a bit of evidence, at least from the Big Bang on. Now what happened before the Big Bang, who knows? We don't have any evidence of it. But what is intriguing is that all of creatures that now fill the universe and especially living creatures, that billions of them that populate the earth, especially the one-celled bacteria and all those marvelous objects -- we meant that creation is an ongoing process in the Christian perspective. So, that means that God is sustaining everything. And some theologians, as you perhaps are aware, have even pointed out that Christ is present in every particle, that is every sub atomic particle. It's a manifestation of the creative energy, power, goodness, beauty of God that seems to be expressing itself in almost infinite diversity, whether it's matter or whether it's life forms.

So everything then follows its nature once it is started, or once it's on the evolutionary chain, as its time comes, it comes into being, expresses itself and it doesn't interfere too much with other natures, at least when you consider the trillions and trillions of life forms -- well, you wonder how it works so well that at least up till now it's still going. But the real tricky thing in evolution is human freedom, which seems to be fairly recent -- came into being, I don't know, I hesitate to say how many years ago. Nobody quite knows, and it depends how you interpret the evidence a bit. But it certainly came into being very recently, 5,000 thousand years -- maybe that's much too long. But anyway, let's give it a little elbow room.

But compared to the four and a half billion years of life on earth, or at least the existence of this planet? It's practically invisible on the time scale, but what human freedom does is introduce a factor that even God has decided not to control completely. It's true we have a certain very modest range of freedom; contemporary psychology has suggested that there's so many factors, psychological and inherited, that you can't be too sure how much freedom you have. And then if you remember, you're seeing the world out of prepackaged values and dispositions that come from our upbringing, or perhaps the collective unconscious; that is to say everybody else's thoughts and cultures that may be accessible in some database in the universe, or in the atmosphere beyond time. So that we may be plugging into the influences that we have no idea yet. It's a new idea basically in psychology, the collective unconscious.

But that is to say, even without the conscious influence of our cultural conditioning, there is this factor of unconscious conditioning that may influence our decisions without our being aware of it. Have you ever seen a mob functioning? They're not functioning on the basis of human reason or free will. There's some spirit that takes over them, some emotional energy that carries them away and they scarcely know what they're doing for a few hours and so on. So it seems that God wants to respect the freedom God's given to people. Hence, in order to achieve God’s means or the evolutionary goals of creation, God has to work around our freedom and not contradict it directly. But this is extraordinary: have you ever tried to work around difficult children? How can you make them feel that you are affirming them and at the same time get them to stop spitting in the soup and things like that.

So the divine economy then, when you think of it from this cosmic [perspective], or trends, a cultural vision of reality, is organizing these myriad -- some personal, some impersonal -- aspects of creation. So they all served each other and life seems to have been destined by the evolutionary process and what we know of the development of the Big Bang. But the Big Bang is so big you can't get your mind around it. Remember in a trillionth of a millimeter is all the energies that the universe has ever had, perhaps will have. And what blew it apart? This is almost a bigger act in creation itself. Boom. There's no reason why it blew apart that we know of, science has to work at that a little bit more. It took 300 million years, I think it is, for light to be able to escape from this enormously spreading energies and matter as it unfolded, and as it unfolded in galaxies formed and collapsed into each other and fought with each other.

And they created the kind of heat in just the right proportions that enabled other elements to come into existence and eventually the elements that are necessary for life. And so we really, as we sit here, are the extraordinary result of 13.7, I think is the latest number, billion years of development with a purpose that seems to express itself in humanity and in a consciousness that is aware of creation and can respond to it, can say yes or no to the beauty and goodness of God's creation. Only we haven't completely emerged from that human evolution through veggies and through camels, through the chimpanzees and finally the humanoids that are fairly recent 5,000 years ago. So at what point did the animal that became at least partly logical or was getting pretty good at tools, but didn't have reason yet, at what moment did he become a fully human being? Well, of course, scripture addresses this, but it doesn't have the scientific evidence that may be accumulating and maybe some interesting discoveries as years go on.

But whatever happens, it doesn't change for a Christian the basic fact that God has made everything, sustains everything and prevents the thing from collapsing, at least before the time. It's still expanding. Think of the great questions that science has offered us. Remember in the fathers of the church, they spoke of two books of revelation. One being, of course, the Bible, the other being Nature. Well, you know how some aspects of nature blow you away under some circumstances, but now as never before nature and how it works and the inmost character of its workings is available to these sophisticated instruments that never happened before. So now we've discovered the sub atomic world, which is even some respects more exciting than the one that we're somewhat familiar with, basically somewhat chaotic. How you get order out of that, I don't know, but it's so awesome creation and the infinitesimal is just as infinite or enormous.

For instance, they can't find the basic foundation of matter. The closest they agree on now seems to be it's just a vibration. When somebody speaking there's a vibration created in the atmosphere. Well, it's interesting that in the Greek, the logos, the word of God is the creator, God spoke and the world came into being. So perhaps God’s voice, God’s creative voice is what started. And all we are is just a little more complex or condensed vibrations that are be able to produce us.

So one of the highly regarded Catholic theologians in the last century, Teilhard de Chardin spoke that Christ is present in every particle. Well, if you can allow the great insights of religion and the contemplative dimension of the gospel to come together with science, discovering how the inner nature of things works as far as we can ascertain, it seems to me to be reinforcing some of the great insights of scripture and providing us with new insights into what the mystery of God, of creation, of the incarnation, and even the Trinity, what that means. If the Trinity is the source of all creation, then everything created is the trace of it, or is leaving its manifestation here and there, but not in a way that contradicts the evolutionary process, which leaves room for freedom, room for each nature to follow its own design. And the net results is this continuing movement into human understanding of the nature of God that we call revelation, but which may not be ending, but just beginning in our time.

By that I mean biological evolution has produced a world population. Teilhard de Chardin thinks that that biological evolution is complete now with human intelligence and our capacity for spirituality, and that the next phase of human development is spiritual evolution, that is, the development of the revelation that receives insofar as this affects our consciousness and social behavior. From the beginning of the great world religions, they've always said the human nature is one that the human family is one, that source of everything is one, our destiny is one with some different terms for those things. But nobody has ever believed this. Maybe it's because we're just too dumb or too dense. I prefer to think we just haven't evolved very far, that we're still pretty much under the influence of our vegetable brain or our mammalian brain. It's a three-tiered brain.

The reptilian brain takes care of necessary functions of nutrition and life and reproduction and then the mammalian brain has senses and the higher mammals have feelings. And so at some point the human consciousness came into being, which was able to reflect on experience, the other life forms that we know can't do. And so the focus of evolution as it is seems to be now in a place where the further powers of the brain can form the physiological basis for deeper spiritual experience. And in fact, the frontal lobes that people, the brain researchers say, are developing now seem to have a lot to do with moral judgment. And so maybe this is the beginnings of much more universal access or interest in the spiritual values of the great world religions, and especially of the extraordinary revelation that Christians have been given in which they are invited to see themselves as the body of God, specifically the mystical body of Christ. So that each of us is not just a member of a species but it is an individual. It is both a member of the human family and an individual at the same time.

Obviously this is a much more complex situation than animals have to deal with, which simply is preserving their species so they don't reflect and they can't relate in a human and personal way with that aspect of God that is so special, so tender I guess you could say, so human. At least this is what God has done and let's not attribute this to evolutionary process or motive. God doesn't really need us. God created us to share God’s life so that the maximum amount of divine life that God can give us can become through the stages of spiritual development the participant as St. Peter says in his apostle, participants in the divine nature.

In other words, there's something in God that is in us. Is it genes? I don't think God has those. But usually when you think of being a child of somebody, you expect to have some of their genome, don't you? Or at least inherit some of their traits. So just what it means to say that we're children of God is a question that deserves to be studied today, it seems to me, in the context of what medical and anatomical and the genetic sciences are able to present to us as reasonable hypotheses so that we might know ourselves not just from one source, but by the pervasive truth of several different fundamental sciences that tell us about the world that we live in, the social structures that we inherited and our own subjective capacity within a tradition to grow into new levels of understanding and manifestation of the mystery of God. So the divine economy first of all is this capacity to do everything at once.

In other words, you don't have to work two jobs in order to make a living or probably three nowadays. You can just take the present moment, and by doing that you become a part of the universe and a co-creator by becoming one with the dynamic presence and action of God throughout God’s creation. So in our time it seems to me science is inviting us to have a bigger view of what's involved in creation of a view that manifests the infinite oneness of God, and the infinite diversity at the same time within the Trinity. In the Trinity, according to theological understanding, the Father is the original source of the Godhead. There's no time, of course, in God, so that the begetting of the Son is instantaneous. Only there was no incident, that was just eternity. Remember eternity is not just a long time but no time whatsoever.

So God just is, that's one of the few very dynamic descriptions God gave of Godself as you remember to Moses in the Burning Bush. Moses said, well, who should I say sent me? And he said, oh, just tell him “I am” sent you. Well, maybe casual for God, but mind blowing for these stupid pharaohs. “I am” means isness, just is. That's all you can say about God, and that's not even accurate because God is beyond being as the creator of all being. So there is no rational category as such that can really state who God is. So all our statements are pointers towards a mystery that is beyond any rational definition.

We use pointers because we have to start somewhere. But the movement is to realize that the reality is the mystery. The ultimate reality is the ultimate mystery. Not in the sense, of course, of just a puzzle, but in the sense of an extraordinary reality that there is no way to do anything except to adore lovingly. When you're overwhelmed you usually fall on your face. That's, at least, what the apostles did on Mount Tabor when the cloud overshadowed them. And so the response to the ultimate reality as mystery is really like the 24 ancients described in heaven in the book of Revelation. They all throw their thrones or their crowns I guess they have in front of God as if, hell with it. It doesn't mean any because the reality is so far above anything that compared with God, nothing matters. But for that very reason, everything matters because God is present in a particle that is to say a trillionth of a millimeter, or an invisible particle, or just a vibration.

So it seems to me we could use some of the scientific discoveries of our time to think bigger of God. God is the neighbor next door, but God also isn't. God's the mountain, but God isn't. God's totally present in absolutely everything that exists, but not limited to anything whatsoever. That's why God doesn't need anything, because God has everything. The only thing that God really looks to us for is to allow God to manifest this infinite love for creatures who have absolutely no claim on God. That is to say grace is a gratuity, that's what it means. It's a loving parent – “being” apparently is love. They must be the same. It just wants to give Godself away to you. Maybe this is because God is infinitely humble. Those of us who come out of the Christian tradition are aware of Paul's extraordinary description of the incarnation, that the word of God, God's son, the son of God’s bosom, the son to whom God totally gave everything that he is, as father and as Godhead, so that God lives in the son rather than in Godself.

Everything is gift in the Trinity, and the motive of a gift is infinite love. In any case, if the son becomes human, he has to manifest in some way this rhythm of totally giving oneself away, whoever that is, human or divine. So sacrifice, which is the gift of self, appears as the meaning of the Trinity from a certain sense. And since the Trinity creates, sacrifice must be the meaning of the universe, it's ultimate meaning. In heaven sacrifice is delightful, because total gift of self is bliss or is eternal alive. In this world, total sacrifice is hell sometimes. But I wouldn't be surprised by this because this is the way God happens to be. And so the divine economy is an investment in giving everything away. It's a different kind of trade structure. And the person who exemplifies it, of course, besides Christ is, of course, the widow.

Just take a minute, remember Jesus was surveying in the temple, the poor box I guess, and seeing what was put into it. And the people who were fairly well healed were dropping in large coins into the treasury and along came a widow. Now a widow in those days had nothing. She'd lost her husband, the source of her support and she didn't have any money apparently. And all she had was two pennies, I guess, that's all she had. But she came along, and Jesus was watching, and she dropped those two coins in -- so small you couldn't hear them hit the bottom of the plate or whatever. And this sent Jesus into an ecstasy. Why? Because he saw the mystery of the Trinity manifested in this woman giving away, not only as he said from her abundance, but from her want. So this is an interesting kind of investment, but that Jesus has a different view of the economy is not condemning ours, but this is an alternative one that you might consider or which you may have to consider.

But notice Jesus' arithmetic. He says to disciples, this woman poor as she is, with her two pennies, has given in *more* than all the others. That's the way the Divine counts. And this is quite different from our economy. It's not that ours is wrong, but maybe it's not the best one. And the best one is still to come, when we all have the same disposition and approach: investments from the perspective of giving away everything rather than getting everything. Now the result is that you get eternal rest, in other words, you don't have to go to retirement home, you just wait a few extra years and you go right to heaven where you have eternal rest free of charge.

So, on your investment, there is no greater return than the Divine Banker. As you know from the parables, Jesus seemed to have taken a certain interest in the banking profession. There's several parables about it. And so it's worth taking him as your financial advisor. This apparently is what the widow did and that's how she survived so well with nothing, because she relied on God. She had so much trust. But the fascinating thing about this lady, she never was given any credit. She never knew that Jesus, the son of God, was watching her with great admiration and joy. He didn't go after her to pat her on the back and say, you're so generous, won't you come and help the disciples with your financial arrangements?

So there are other places in the gospel where this rhythm of manifesting the Trinitarian relationships, in giving ourselves away, sometimes heroically like that poor woman, is the best investment there is. That's what Jesus seems to be saying. Doesn't mean you can always do it because of circumstances, but that you are disposed to do it in the sense that you are willing to accept God's will and to be detached from your resources in this world if they're taken away. So that your trust in the divine economy supplants the anxieties and the distress and the worry that will plague us half to death unless we have a deeper sense of trust that no matter what happens, God is with us.

[microphone drops and someone arrives to help. Thomas then jokes:] I think here's the expert. Yes, I think I have ears like a dog they flap and I lose this. I'm the distress of all engineers. Yes.

Let's take just a little more look at the nature of God and the divine economy that God operates out of. And you can judge for yourself whether it's a better one than the one that has been enshrined in our culture for so many years. The real purpose of wealth according to the gospel, the reason why God gives it to so many people is that they can help those in need. Wealth is not for ourselves after our needs are filled. And notice how much *farther* in an attitude of self-giving this widow goes in giving away out of her need, not just her abundance. So these Christian principles are challenging because they come from the heart of God, which is infinite love and concern. And the gospel seems to, at least is understood in our brothers and sisters in certain parts of the world, to have a special love of the poor.

In other words, if you look at the Psalms, the hero of the Psalms is obviously someone who is afflicted for God's sake, who accepts the difficulties and over and over again the poor are referred to in the Psalms and in scripture. It's because of their need. And there are different kinds of poor. There's the materially poor, of course. And there's also a further category that might be called the destitute. The poor you'll always have with you, Jesus says, because not everybody is apt to, or their circumstances prevent them. But the destitute are those who are our responsibility. If you believe in the oneness of the human family, as scripture teaches -- remember Isaiah says, clothe the naked and despise not your own flesh. So in God's eyes there's just one flesh, there's just one species. There's just one human family. And the oneness that is a cosmic reality to the way creation has been formed, calls upon us to make every effort to heal those who are in desperate situations, or the destitute as we would for ourselves.

And this is an insight that comes both from the Old and New Testament, and which is very challenging. In our time, remember two and a half or so billion live on less than a dollar a day. So they're really poor, but there are millions who are destitute living [like] animals, that we wouldn't subject to in our culture. And this does cry out to our conscience to find ways and to put priorities on the poor rather than on other aspects of self-interest. Perhaps the greatest self-interest, if it was enlightened, is the fact that other people are us at the deepest level. There's only one human being in a sense, and that's epitomized in Christ. And we know that he speaks of being present in Paul, when Paul was persecuting the Christian, why are you persecuting me?, he said.

So whatever is happening to any human being, is happening to us in some degree. And by being human, we cannot avoid some accountability of how we responded to the desperate situation of other people. And perhaps we can only know that by ourselves passing through a period of desperation. And it's feeling the same suffering, I suppose, that enables us to become, have a sense of oneness with others. But this oneness also extends in the divine economy to the whole planet and to all creation, perhaps other intelligent beings elsewhere in the universe. Oneness is perhaps the insight that's most desperately needed in our time among religious and spiritual people, because other people are not going to be interested in that. They just don't get it, they don't feel it. Their intuition isn't able to see Christ or God present in others, especially those in great need. But the more our compassion goes out to people, the more you can be sure that God is growing and living in you because that's God’s chief concern, is those who are most in need or desperate need.

And because we have freedom, God expects us to do something about this according to our capacity, our other duties and so forth. And so this is perhaps a challenge of our immediate time to look at what the divine economy is, in our concerns for our own economy. Obviously it's going to do great damage to those who are poor or dispossessed so that the poor are going to increase in numbers perhaps. But the sharing or the solidarity with others in their difficulties is not a disaster, but a great insight and benefit to understanding the grace of the contemplative prayer that sees life and its difficulties from God's perspective rather than just our own.