Forging a Common Interest in the Gospels

Catherine M. Murphy

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THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Welcome to Integral, a podcast production out of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University, exploring the question: "Is there a common good in our common home?" I'm Theresa Ladrigan-Whelpley, the director of the Bannan Institutes in the Ignatian Center and your host for this podcast. We're coming to you from Vari Hall on the campus of Santa Clara in the heart of Silicon Valley California.

This season of Integral, we're looking at the ways in which issues of economic justice intersect with the question of the common good. Today we'll critically examine how the Christian scriptural tradition underwrites historical and even contemporary commitments to economic justice.

AUDIO CLIP: "Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous, so the last will be first and the first will be last?" What could be more fair than a just wage? But in this story Jesus says the Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner who rewards everyone the same, no matter how much they merit. This couldn't be further from our capitalist values. But in this kingdom, in this alternative economy, the landowner is more generous than that. Pope Francis called our economy one of exclusion and inequality, and he said, "Such an economy kills."

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: To unpack these questions, we're joined today by Catherine Murphy, Associate Professor of New Testament in the Religious Studies Department at Santa Clara and Bannan Institute scholar in the Ignatian Center. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on the Bible, the historical Jesus, gender and early Christianity, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and a course on economic ethics, titled "Wealth, Work, and The Gospel". She's published three books and is currently preparing a book that situates early Christian testimonies in their economic and political contexts. Welcome, Kitty.

KITTY MURPHY: Thank you, Theresa – it's wonderful to be here, and to have the opportunity to talk about economic concerns from a different vantage point perhaps than the other contributors to this series. My interests lie not in our present economy so much as in the past—specifically, the texts and traditions of Judaism and Christianity from 2000 years ago that serve as a foundation for Christian thinking about the common good.

I don't imagine that we can simply map the values of the past into our own situation today because our world is so different, our economy is so different, from the world and economy of the early Roman Empire. Today I hope to look at the strategies the early Christians adopted to respond to the economic pressures they faced. We may find some surprising and provocative alternatives to the values that shape our economic worldview today.

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Great, and I wonder if you could start by saying something about the differences between our economy and theirs, and then maybe share a bit about these alternative Christian strategies.

KITTY MURPHY: Sure, I'd be happy to, and I'll use myself as an example. I'm a middle class college professor teaching in a private university in one of the wealthiest areas of the world. I sometimes wonder how I can pretend to understand Jesus, an illiterate manual laborer from a marginal backwater, Nazareth, whose preaching dealt with slaves and absentee landlords, farming and fishing. I live in a house in Silicon Valley, with a comfortable middle-class income, a stable job and a retirement fund; he abandoned his home and trade and family, moving around, living off the generosity of others. My teaching affords me security; his teaching got him killed.

Jesus and most of the people he spoke with were living at or just above subsistence level—farmers and tradespeople whose only social safety nets were embedded within kinship and patronage networks rather than markets or government welfare programs. Security came from land, and the ownership and control of land were central to political power, whether you were just the head of a family, the king of a small state, or the emperor in Rome. When we think of Rome, we think of the emperors and the Flavian amphitheatre or colosseum, the military and Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*. We think usually of the winners, their impact on western civilization, their legacy of law and rhetoric, engineering and architecture, cultural hegemony and the Roman peace. We think less of the subsistence-level folk who comprised the majority of the population, on whose backs the peace was built—the farmers who were one drought or one creditor away from losing their land in debt, farming it for someone else rather than for themselves and maybe even being sold into debt slavery to cover the loan.

These are people whose main meal every day is porridge or bread with some vegetables if they're lucky and some wine or beer for much-needed calories; whose only collateral if they need a loan is the outer cloak that doubles as their blanket at night. These are women who can expect to marry around age 12-14 so that more of the children they carry might live past age 10. The childhood mortality rate was about 52% in Rome in the year 150 CE, and infant mortality as high as 20–32% compared to 4.4% in the developing world today. And no one, even in the higher classes, has anything approaching adequate medical care.

I have not lived with this anxiety—my position economically is more like that of the Romans than of Jesus and his Jewish companions. When Jesus says in Matthew 6:25, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on," well, that's fairly easy for me— I'm NOT very anxious about these things. And how would this have sounded in Jesus' time for someone who never had enough to eat, or who was about to give birth without medical care, or who only had two garments, and had to leave one with a creditor as collateral?

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: It seems they would certainly have been much more anxious, and it seems with good reason. But does that mean that when Jesus tells them not to be anxious, they probably would have thought he was crazy? I mean, really, how could you NOT be anxious in that economic situation?

KITTY MURPHY: I think they would have. At best it's provocative, at worst it's irresponsible—and in fact we hear in Mark's gospel that when Jesus returns to his hometown, his relatives come to seize him because people are saying that he's lost his mind.[1] Later, his mother, brothers and sisters can't even get into the house he's preaching in—there are too many people inside.[2]

Jesus left his family and job and home behind, but formed another kinship household; he asked his disciples to leave their homes and jobs and families, but offered something else in place of their usual security—an alternative way to take care of those needs. If we listen to some of the stories Jesus told, we can begin to hear these alternative values. Here's a paraphrase of one:

PAUL BECKER (audio clip): ""The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. He went back out to the marketplace at nine o'clock, at noon, at three, and at five. Each time he found idle workers, and each time he hired them to work. When evening came, he told his manager to pay the last hired first, and they received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. They grumbled against the landowner, saying, "We've borne the burden of the day's heat and we got no more than them." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'"[3]

KITTY MURPHY: This couldn't be further from our capitalist values; shouldn't those who do more earn more? Shouldn't those in the higher value fields get a higher salary? Shouldn't supply and demand dictate how labor is valued? But in this kingdom, in this alternative economy, the landowner is more generous than that. And the listeners had a choice they didn't have in real life—they could *choose* to be subjects in *this* kind of kingdom. But that would mean they would have to accept people in the group who didn't deserve the rewards they received by that *other* economic calculus. They would have to leave that calculus behind and frame a common interest with the "less deserving."

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: I imagine that would have gone over about as well then as it would now or does now.

KITTY MURPHY: Yeah I can't imagine there were a little people who accept it. There's a story in Mark's gospel of a rich young man, who asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life besides keep all the commandments. Jesus says to him,

PAUL BECKER (audio clip): "'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'"[4]

KITTY MURPHY: Mark says that rich young man was shocked and went away grieving, because he had many possessions. I suppose this isn't that different in our consumer-oriented economy—we prize our possessions. We imagine that they give us status, we define ourselves in terms of them. We fetishize them— that is, we give them power over us. But if we see this story as only about what one must *lose* to "inherit," we miss the point.

There is a gain here—there is an invitation to follow Jesus. And in the group of people who follows Jesus, there is still resources; it's just that they are distributed differently. Take the central prayer that Jesus offers his followers. People today know it as the "Our Father," but the original form of it that scholars reconstruct is a bit shorter than the version you might know:

PAUL BECKER (audio clip): "'Father—may your name be kept holy! Let your kingdom come: our day's bread give us today; and cancel our debts for us, as we too have cancelled for those in debt to us; and do not put us to the test!'"[5]

KITTY MURPHY: There is that kingdom again, and it's a place where people get the bread they need and cancel the debts others owe them. It's not something that's promised for some future heaven or end-time apocalypse: it's something they are to provide for each other here and now. "Cancel our debts for us," they pray, "as we too have cancelled for those in debt to us."

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: I've heard that passage but it was phrased, "forgive us our sins or trespasses, as we forgive those who've trespassed against us."

KITTY MURPHY: That is the version in the Gospel of Luke, but the Gospel of Matthew likely preserves the earlier form closer to Jesus' words. Luke broadens the command, but Matthew's is very specific, and it's economic.

KITTY MURPHY: You know, about 36 years after Jesus' death, the Jews revolted against Rome, and one of the first things they did in Jerusalem was to burn the debt records in the archives in order to erase their own obligations and to embolden the poorer folk to join them, safe now from the leverage of their creditors.[6] Debts were obviously a huge problem, and if Jesus taught his followers to release each other from debt, it would be a dramatic step indeed.

Here's another story told in the gospels, this time told not *by* Jesus but *about* him. It comes from the Gospel of Luke, just before Jesus enters Jerusalem where he will be executed by the Romans:

PAUL BECKER (audio clip): "He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'"[7]

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: It's pretty shocking to imagine that someone with that much wealth and power would voluntarily give it up just because. The rich young man that you mentioned earlier he couldn't do it, right?

KITTY MURPHY: Yeah and he couldn't do it, and *he* was presented as an honorable, ethical Jew who follows the commandments, not a sinful and avaricious collaborator with Rome. This tax collector Zacchaeus is the last guy you'd expect to reverse course. But that is what Jesus seems to be asking of people. This "kingdom of God" that he speaks of is not just an alternative economy, but an alternative political structure.

Those benefitting from the current political arrangements or the current notions of who has or deserves power stand to lose if a new kingdom with different rules is established — or they stand to gain if they're willing to lose it all, like Zacchaeus. There's a teaching Jesus offers his disciples when two of them vie for positions of power in his movement:

PAUL BECKER (audio clip): "'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'"[8]

KITTY MURPHY: That is not a teaching you would ever hear from Ayn Rand! Self-effacement rather than self-interest? Serving others rather than being served?

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: But is the message of a political agitator or a revolutionary? I can understand how Jesus is offering alternative economic and political value system, but why would this message of service and sharing get him killed?

KITTY MURPHY: That's a good question. Romans and those who worked with them understood their imperial arrangements as the best system, the source of an unprecedented "peace" throughout the Mediterranean, a kingdom or empire whose power brought a kind of security for those in its sway. But for the folk who paid the tribute, who fell deeper into debt as lands were confiscated to pay off loans or convert to export crops or pay off political favors—to those folk, the Roman peace looked different. Indigenous traditions like the Jewish tradition, with its memories of liberated slaves and independent kingdoms and promised messiahs, were like a tinder box next to a pile of kindling, and anyone who challenged the good news of the emperor with the gospel of another king could be the spark that sent the whole thing up in flames. Jesus was one of those people—viewed as a potential spark by those who had something to lose. And so the Romans executed him.

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: This is a depressing reminder that any notion we might have of the "common good" will be contested, because we define the good differently and we belong to perhaps even different "commons"— different communities and sometimes competing interests in these different commons and communities. So I wonder as you think of the early Christian tradition what resources you think it offers to our reflections on the "common good" for the economy today?

KITTY MURPHY: Some people say that Jesus preached an apocalyptic message of an approaching end that never came — he was wrong about the dawn of God's different kingdom and economy. Others say that that was all so long ago, and their world so different from ours, that none of its ethics can be translated into later communities or circumstances. But the interesting thing to me as I study early Christianity is that we see his followers in the century after his death persisting in just these practices. From the letter of a Roman governor in Turkey about 80 years after Jesus' death, we learn that early Christians:

PAUL BECKER (audio clip): were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food—but ordinary and innocent food.[9]

KITTY MURPHY: There is the bread and the debt forgiveness of the Lord's Prayer. There—prominently displayed—are the economic bonds of this alternative community. The persistence of these ideas in early Christianity points, I think, to certain conclusions about the common good that one can draw:

First, there is a fundamental belief here that the goods of the earth come ultimately from a source beyond any human government, and therefore all humans have a claim to them because all humans are made in the image of God.
Second, there is a commitment here to the just distribution of those goods, not so that everyone has everything equally but so that there be no desperate need. This is the Jewish vision of the sabbatical year. It's like an economic reset. It means that all people should have their basic needs met first, which is why Jewish and Christian ethics privilege the needs of the most vulnerable. It also means that private property is not an unconditioned right.[10] It is a right we enjoy, but it is conditioned on the equal rights of others to enjoy the goods of the earth too.

Third, there is a premise here that self-interest and the excess accumulation of goods betray an anxiety that undermines concern for the other, and thus that undermines both the "common" and the "good."

And lastly, there is a recognition here that the creation of such an ideal community, where everyone's needs are met, is an ideal, but a goal toward which we might strive. The early Christians viewed its *full* realization as something to be hoped for in the end time. But for them that did not mean that they would wait for it to happen. Even if they could not realize it fully, I think they tried to realize it provisionally.

The redemption of debt, the provision of bread, the extension of hospitality, the practice of charity — these were less an opiate of the masses than an antidote for the injuries that human economic behavior in every day and age can cause. Pope Francis called our economy one of exclusion and inequality and he said, "Such an economy kills." And as long as our economy still does such damage, there will remain a need for prophetic voices to diagnose the diseases we inflict, and for generous Samaritans to look beyond parochial boundaries of party or class or nationality — to look beyond self-interest—and to see instead the wounded humans whose needs become our own.

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Thanks for listening to Integral, a Bannan Institute podcast of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University. Special thanks to Professor Catherine Murphy for her contributions to today's episode.

Coming up next week is Anne Baker, Assistant Professor in the Political Science Department at Santa Clara. We'll explore the policy and partisan preferences of donors, seeking surrogate representation in the U.S. political arena. How is economic justice and the common good realized within our contemporary democracy?

Technical direction for Integral was provided by Craig Gower and Fern Silva. Our production manager is Kaylie Erickson. Thanks to Mike Whalen for advisory and editorial support. You can find us on the web at scu.edu/integral or subscribe via iTunes, SoundCloud, Stitcher, or Podbean.

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[1] Mark 3:21.
[2] Mark 3:31-35.
[3] Matthew 20:1-16, NRSV.
[4] Mark 10:21.
[5] Q 11:2-4.
[6] Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.427.
[7] Luke 19:1-10.
[8] Mark 10:42b-45.
[9] Pliny, *Letter to Trajan* 10.96-97.
[10] Pope Pius VI, *Populorum progressio* §23.
[11] Pope Francis I, *Evangelii Gaudium* [*The Joy of the Gospel*, apostolic exhortation] no. 53, *Vatican* (24 November 2013), online, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papafrancesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html, accessed 3 April 2017.