

April 29, 2020

The PPP, Jesus And Me

A blessed Wednesday to my faith family,

Several weeks ago, congress rolled out the multi-trillion dollar CARES act. That larger act contains a provision known as the Payroll Protection Program (PPP) the purpose of which is to help small, at risk companies to survive during this time of enforced isolation and business closures.

The program, in essence, provides grants to qualifying businesses equal to 2.5 times their monthly payroll. The money is, in essence, free money so long as it is used to meet payroll (and some facilities expenses) and with the condition that employees on the payroll at the beginning of that 2.5 months, must still be on the payroll at the conclusion of that time frame.

Much to their credit, the framers of the CARES act made non-profit entities eligible to receive benefits under the PPP. Of course most non-profits are not financially strong in the best of times, to say nothing of times like this, marked as they are by crisis and unprecedented economic disruption. Apparently those who constructed the program viewed the work of non-profits (things such as caring for the most vulnerable among us and holding community together) as being especially essential in these troubled times.

In any event, the ELCA strongly advised all of its congregations to apply for PPP funds. You should know that Trinity took immediate action, applying on the first day our bank was receiving applications. The first round of money, hundreds of Billions of dollars, was made available several weeks ago and was exhausted almost immediately. Congress made several hundred billion more dollars available this week. Like many others, we await word from our bank.

My purpose in writing to you is, in part, to inform you about the PPP as respects our congregation and its ministry as I have done in the foregoing. I also want to make some theological observations about all of this.

PPP was promoted as a program that would help the most vulnerable small businesses, providing funding to allow them to continue to pay their employees through the depth of the economic disruption as “non-essential” businesses were forced to shut down. It was intended to help little mom and pop shops, restaurants, nail salons and framing shops...but guess who got the money?

Multiple reports in the past weeks have shown that Banks have been prioritizing their more powerful, well-capitalized customers over the small, vulnerable businesses the program was designed to help. I suppose it makes sense from a strategic standpoint that they would prioritize their best and biggest customers. Of course, it also flies in the face of the program’s purpose.

Yesterday, the L.A. Lakers, made news by returning the money they had taken under this program intended for small vulnerable businesses. The Lakers who, by the way, are worth almost \$4 billion, returned the \$4.6 million in funds they had received under the PPP. The other day I saw a list of fifteen public companies with a combined market capitalization of over \$17 billion who have either had pangs of conscience, or have been shamed into returning the combined \$120mm they had applied for under the program. Ultimately, These companies did the right thing. Of course, there are untold numbers of well-heeled recipients who've suffered no such pangs of conscience...or shame.

I bring this situation to you not as a rant against a broken political system and the immorality of the powerful. (Although I can't help but think of Jesus' parable of the dishonest steward that ends with these words: *"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.*) I bring it you your attention in order to show what a blessed counterpoint the way of Jesus and the Kingdom of God is to the way of this world.

The truth is that the sort of thing we've seen in recent days through the PPP where the powerful take theirs at the expense of the needy is not a new phenomenon. The Prophets living eight centuries before Jesus regularly observed such behavior and consistently decried it. Jesus routinely operated in a way that made clear his desire to care for the vulnerable and to call to account those who used their power to coerce rather than bless. (Luke 16:19-31) Jesus didn't hang out with the titans of industry or build political alliances to leverage power. He hung out with the folks who could not do a thing for him and blessed those who could not respond in kind. Then he taught his followers that they should care for others in the same way. (Luke 14:12)

The perversion of the purpose of the PPP is emblematic of the way of the world... The ones who have something to offer, who can exert power, who are "worth something" are the ones who get more. The ones who have nothing to offer but their need are often left holding the (empty)bag. (See Matthew 13:12)

How wonderful it is to know that in the kingdom of God, we're blessed not because we deserve it, or have something to offer, but because we don't. How wonderfully blessed it is that the benefits of life, love, hope, healing and all the riches of the kingdom come to those who have nothing to offer except their need and their unworthiness.

If you always have it together and never find yourself overmatched and overwhelmed, maybe that doesn't mean much to you. But for the rest of us who know what it is to feel vulnerable, powerless, unworthy, hopeless, helpless, or in need of rescue, we **know** what good news that is!

You know, the more I think about it, the more I think that Jesus would sense something very familiar to him in the PPP!