

A First Century Stimulus Plan

Micah 4:1-5; James 1:19-27

A Sermon by Rev. John Minott

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I think Lewis Carroll was way ahead of his time... or, perhaps I could be convinced by the overwhelming evidence of current headlines, that history repeats itself – over and again - and the political, economic, social and cultural milieu in which Lewis Carroll lived and wrote is being re-enacted before our very eyes, ears, and bank accounts.

We are told by our economists that unsecured and unpayable debt has destroyed our economy, threatened our life style, de-stabilized our currency and has lessened our financial trustworthiness on the world scene. To right all of this, our government has instituted a stimulus plan that spends more money than we have or ever hope to secure – except by borrowing money we can't pay back.

- We decide the best way to save private industry is to let the government take over.
- We assign oversight of industry to government watchdogs who have never run a business.
- We impose business plans on business, plans developed by those who run the government, which probably has the worst business plan ever developed – at least, since Lewis Carroll was observing his world “through the looking glass.”
- And more – we deplore the moral decay in our nation even as we build casinos, play the lottery, idolize Hollywood and elect crooks (because we don't vote.)
- And more: we chafe at the dumbing down of America as we watch mindless and soulless TV, and spend hours on YouTube or worse, blog ourselves into inanity and meanwhile have no idea what our children are watching – or doing.

I guess my sermon this morning – if it has a point – is about a stimulus plan that might work! I believe it's more basic than anything Washington would – or could – ever devise, but I also believe that without this fundamental stimulation, the government's plan will not work.

I believe our nation was founded and formed, created and developed, nurtured and cultivated on Judeo-Christian ideals. We could spend a lot of Sunday Morning Adult Forums discussing just what those ideals are, and how they have informed our nation over the past 234 years, but they have been basic as to how we have understood ourselves and how we have viewed the world.

For all of our mistakes, our errors, yes, our sins; still, few of us know of any place we would rather live; and it's the millions who try to gain access to our shoes, and darned few yearning for someone - anyone - else's!

DeTocqueville, I think it was who said "America is great because she is good. If America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great."

But that was then... Now is now.

But - as I have suggested, if history does repeat itself, then now is also then. And, I'd like to take you back to an earlier "then", and invite you to think about a "First Century Stimulus Plan." I am well aware that technologically, scientifically, materially, and in many other ways, 21st century America is a long way from 1st century Palestine.

- In the 1st century, they did have the wheel, but it was horses than turned them.
- Two thousand years ago, they did have houses, but a fortuitous easterly breeze was their only A.C. and an open fire was the best most people could do for heat. Lawns and gardens, sidewalks and indoor plumbing were not their lot.
- In those long-ago days, they did have markets, but the open bazaar was as close to a super market as one could find, and often enough, you'd have to do your own butchering.

And the litany could go on and on, but you get the point. In many ways, for all our complaining, we are more comfortable than was royalty in the 1st century world. But this morning, I would like to submit that there are some ways in which we of the 21st century are quite comparable to those of the 1st.

In both instances we have suffered from oppressive government - too big - too invasive - too expensive. The government we have is many times larger and more intrusive than anything the framers of our constitution could have possibly imagined. That was a time of citizen legislators, and politics was not a career. But also the world of Jesus - the land around Nazareth and surely around Jerusalem - was ruled by a distant but very present and oppressive Roman emperor. The empire had thoroughly imposed itself upon the land and its leaders, both secular and religious. There are many students of government and history who warn that we are headed for the same kind of order in our world. They - like us - felt they were overtaxed. Sales taxes raised by 25% on folks whose unemployment rate is soaring and for whom underemployment is widespread, causes us great concern.

But the people of Jesus home town had it no easier. Probably worse. In those days the tax collector had the authority of Rome with all its legions to extract a set amount per person for the emperor and as much more as the tax collector could get for himself. No wonder the tax collectors of Jerusalem and environs were among the most hated of all the neighbors, and great wonder that Jesus selected Matthew – a tax collector – to one of the boys. It turns out it was a good choice, but few head hunters working to staff Jesus' team would have picked Matthew as a likely candidate

Also, like ours, the 1st century in the holy land was a time of economic instability. And too, the religious scene was marked by dishonesty and disloyalty, even while the political scene was being rocked by scandal, as zealots and other terrorists were actively engaged in upsetting the status quo.

Well, if the political leadership is being held hostage by foreign powers; if the religious leadership has sold out to pagan Rome; if the economic scene has cause many to be out of work; if the cost of supporting a military presence has become an overburdening reality upon the people; if the infrastructure is breaking down and there's no money to fix it; if the religious and social values of the nation are eroding and the people are becoming less and less interested in their historic faith -

What can be done? What hope is there? Is this a question for the 1st century – or ours?

Well, it seems to me that it is time for a Stimulus package. Something to get the nation working again. A plan to reunite the people and offer some direction that will lead once more to peace, prosperity, and vision of a better life. And would you believe? A stimulus package has been delivered to the very people who needed it most! In both eras! Amazing.

It was not because the Jewish Parliament devised a well thought out plan;

It was not because Pontius Pilate turned out to be a visionary after all;

It was not because the Caiaphas, the High Priest, suddenly got religion and cleaned up his act;

It was not because the Pharisees suddenly became highly motivated social workers and went about feeding the poor and finding work for the unemployed; **It was not** because the Sadducees suddenly saw the error of their ways and abolished all the cheating, usury, opportunism, and manipulations of their banking system;

It was not because the emperor took pity upon a poor, economically impoverished county way off at the eastern limits and cut taxes or borrowed a ton of money to bail out the First National Bank of Jerusalem.

No, none of these things – nor would any of them have worked anyway, most likely. And, by the way, translated to the 21st century, I don't hold out any great hope, either – and all for the same reason: Addressing the wrong problems.

What happened back then was the appearance upon the scene of a young man who preached a gospel that captured imaginations, that opened new hope, that defied conventional wisdom, that affronted the “powers that were” but which rang absolutely true to the faith upon which the power was founded. That gospel turned out to be a stimulus plan that changed not only the nation, but the world!

I don't think that today I need to reiterate all the finer points of the gospel. You hear them preached about every Sunday. Today I would rather address the grander scheme – the Stimulus Plan as envisioned by a power and a wisdom, greater than any and all of us.

I know this sounds a bit presumptuous – as though I or anyone could really know what God has in mind. But in a way, what I'm about to say was never intended to be a secret, or a hidden plan, or even a mystery. It was made plain in the life, the work, and the teachings of Jesus (and is symbolized to this very day in the bread and the cup we shall share.)

A fundamental statement of this First Century Stimulus Plan is far older than the sages of Jesus' day, and theoretically basic to all they knew and taught. See if you recognize it:

*I am the Lord your God;
You shall have no other gods before me;
You shall make NO graven images;
You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain;
Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy;
Honor your father and your mother;
You shall not kill;
You shall not commit adultery;
You shall not steal;
You shall not bear false witness;
You shall not covet your neighbor's property.*

Most of you will recognize the 10 commandments. **Some** of you could turn to them in your Bible without the index. **A few of you** could describe the context and the meaning – especially if you’re old enough to remember Cecil B. DeMille.

But – how many of our children and young people have ever heard them – or recognize their fundamental place in our society, literature, our history, our culture? How much of our society would even acknowledge their relevance to a “modern” world?

Can you imagine all the grief, pain, terror and misery the world would have avoided if it had simply lived to that standard, an early Stimulus plan? It was designed to stimulate positive moral values, neighborliness, a structured, safe and just community, a better way of life.

Well, the Old Testament is filled with all the evidence of what happens when the plan is not followed! It isn’t pretty. Some of those Old Testament Bible stories aren’t fit for children’s ears! You break the Ten Commandments at your own peril. You still do. But the ancient Hebrews did break them. So then God made it even simpler. We read from Micah earlier:

“Many nations shall come to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of God, and he shall teach us of his ways and we shall walk in his paths;”

And Micah later follows these words with this simple injunction:

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?”

How different history would have looked if even his plan had been followed: justice, mercy, humility. But the world into which Jesus was born gives ample evidence that the Plan was still not acceptable to us humans.

Unfortunately, I have discovered over my lifetime of living through a significant portion of the 20th century, humankind is a slow learner. Or perhaps, more accurately put, every generation of humankind has to learn for itself.

Perhaps it means that every generation needs its own Stimulus Plan! Perhaps that’s why James wrote as he did: (paraphrased)

Remember this, my dear people, - and everyone should be quick to listen – and slow to speak – and slow to get angry. Your anger does not achieve God’s righteous purpose. So get rid of every filthy habit and all wicked Conduct. Submit to God and accept the work that he plans in your hearts, which is able to save you.

There's some more that we read from this passage about following God's plan, but here is James' interpretation of the First Century Stimulus plan, given their problems, their issues and their times. He wrote, and we read:

What God the Father considers to be pure and genuine religion is this: To take care of widows and orphans in their suffering and to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world.

Now that's pretty basic, isn't it! To revitalize the church and the faith, just keep yourself from being corrupted by the world. Of course, they didn't have television in those days, or video games, or rap music. But it didn't take much for a determined young person to get corrupted then as now! Here and now, I want to state that the First Century Stimulus plan, as personified in Jesus Christ, has never been revoked. Successful implementation of that Plan, then or now, would provide all the renewal, all the church growth, all the joy, all the promise, all the hope and all the love the world would need. I think it was GK Chesterton who said "Christianity has not been tied and found wanting, it's just never been tried."

So, perhaps our faith does, indeed, need a new statement of the Plan, just as God has restated it time and again through the Old Testament, in the New Testament, and all the heroes and martyrs ever since.

In my view, the Stimulus Plan for the church, including this one, needs to be simple, easily understood, theologically supportable, and above all, possible. A quick review of the issues confronting us as we think about a new statement of the Stimulus Plan: No one has put it more concisely than Mohandas Gandhi, a couple of generations ago:

*"Things that will destroy us:
Politics without principle;
Pleasure without conscience;
Wealth without work;
Knowledge without character;
Business without morality
Science without humanity
Worship without sacrifice."*

Against that simple list, which to my mind convicts our contemporary society and culture, I would like to submit an equally brief list of terms which I believe would frame a new stimulus package for us, our church, the church universal, and humanity at large; and which would certainly complement the gospel message and yes, the 10 Commandments. Here is the list as I have thought of it. You could make your own:

*Honesty in all your relationships;
Integrity in all your workmanship;
Sincerity in all your commitments;
Faith as an integral part of your life;
Charity as habitual behavior;
Love beyond passion and lust;
Purity in your pursuit of pleasure;
Compassion in your search for friendship;
Responsibility behind your decisions;
Courage in the presence of all the demands of daily life.*

Probably, billions of people will choose not to live up to this list, but think how much better your life would be even if you were the only one who did live up to it.