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Tricia Gates Brown

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THE KINGDOM OF GOD AFTER 9-11

BY TRICIA GATES BROWN

Jesus was born into a time of piercing inequality and imperialist domination. Not only this, but he was born as one of the have-nots, living under the thumb of an occupying power. Jesus grew up in a tiny village in the region of Galilee, a land so verdant and fertile that it produced crops from one end to the other. It boasted of lakes that teemed with fish, common fish that were a staple of the Hellenistic diet, as well as freshwater delicacies for which the Romans paid a premium. Galilee abounded in resources...and was full of tired, hungry people.

In Jesus' day, a relatively small group of wealthy elites, perhaps only 5% or less of the total populace, lived extravagantly off the produce and toil of the rest of the population. This societal arrangement seems to have been characteristic of the entire Mediterranean region during the Roman era, a region classified by anthropologists as an "agrarian society." Agrarian societies invariably display vast inequalities between social strata. But in the Galilee of Jesus' day, times were especially tough.

Throughout most of the first century, Galilee was ruled by the Herods. And for non-elites under Herodian rule, acute injustice was ubiquitous; they buckled under the weight of taxes, tolls, and tithes imposed on them by their leaders. They paid taxes to the Emperor, taxes to the Herodians, tolls for the use of state-owned resources, and tithes to the temple rulers. One scholar of first-century Palestinian economics estimates that after these extractions, a peasant family in Galilee was left with only one-thirteenth of the produce of their land. According to the most conservative estimates, they would have been left with only one-fifth. To adequately understand the consequences of these extractions, one must consider the modest plots of land subsistence farmers owned, and the modest levels of agricultural output typical at that time. By all appearances, Galilean fishermen and craftsmen were similarly put upon by the ruling class.

History testifies that the economic strain proved unbearable for non-elite Galileans during Jesus' day. Subsistence farmers and laborers comprised up to 90% of the population in that abundant region,

yet most were not even getting by. Debt bondage, hunger, disease, and begging were commonplace among the desperately poor throughout Palestine. The burden of domination and destitution in the region sparked social upheaval, a sharp increase in banditry, and eventually a revolt that would be brutally crushed by Rome.

Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God into this very setting. Into a world of inequality and burgeoning revolt, Jesus spoke words few ears could bear to hear. He declared the dawning of God's active reign on Earth, and invited listeners to step out of the world and into the kingdom's healing, nourishing flow. According to Jesus, God's kingdom would be one in which the poor, the mournful, the gentle, the humble, and the peacemakers would be honored. Stepping into the flow of God's kingdom meant living according to its values, resisting evil not by adopting evil's methods of violence and domination, but through risk-taking creativity and love. In the cross and resurrection, such overcoming love was modeled and vindicated. Choosing the way of the kingdom required a willingness to sacrifice everything of worldly value—comfort, safety, financial security—for the one goal of participating in the emerging reign of God. Through parables, Jesus exhorted his disciples to continue his work of healing and truth-speaking, working for the advancement of God's kingdom until the time that he returned.

To his desperate peasant followers, Jesus talked about radical generosity, about foregoing the cultural value of self-sufficiency for reliance on God's provision, about forgiving debts, and about honoring the values of God's kingdom even when they subverted economic norms. In commending such things, Jesus was not recommending that starving people be resigned to their poverty. No, Jesus envisioned his followers as a new kind of family, meeting one another's needs through sharing. Jesus called them to no longer practice generosity only when there existed a guarantee of reciprocation, but to practice a generosity like that of kin. Kin members, at least in Jesus' culture, took care of one another. This is what Jesus offered to those who followed him; this was the kind of community he had in mind. This is what the kingdom looks like. In the family of God as Jesus envisioned it, dependence on God and sharing with one another were to be the guarantors against poverty, and against all of the enmity that it engenders. This is why Jesus could use the words of Isaiah to describe the good news of the kingdom: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the

poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk 4:18-19).

Shortly after the tragedy of September 11, I read from cover to cover the post-9-11 issue of a publication to which I subscribe, *World Press Review*. This magazine features news articles on various topics from newspapers all around the world. Their November 2001 issue included worldwide reflections on the September 11 attacks. I found it fascinating. Writers from around the globe mourned with Americans over those horrendous acts of violence. But these non-American writers seemed to see something the US commercial media did not want us to see: that there is a growing, worldwide bitterness toward America, and that people in every nation can point to causes for that bitterness. This is not to say the writers featured in this magazine saw 9-11 as justified, or thought that America "got what it deserved." Overwhelmingly, they saw no just cause for such acts of terrorism. However, they could see links between the causes of anti-American sentiment around the world, and the effects of such hatred.

Some of the causes of anti-Americanism include the fact that Americans comprise 5% of the world's population yet own 27% of the world's wealth. Americans produce 24% of the world's carbon emissions, which are the main cause of global warming, yet the effects of global warming are impacting and will continue to impact the world's poor far more severely than they will impact most Americans. One could also list the proliferation of sweatshops all around the developing world, where most of the things you and I buy are produced for starvation wages under unspeakable conditions, or the tragic consequences of many World Bank and IMF projects promoted by the US, or the fact that many countries in the global south pay a huge portion of their revenues to northern governments (including the US, because of the global debt crisis brought on, in part, by US financial policies in the '70s and '80s), or the fact that over 50% of the conventional weapons exported around the world come from the United States.

I have not even mentioned the grievances foremost in the minds of Muslims: First, US financial and military support of Israel despite its repression of the Palestinians. Second, US insistence that non-military items be embargoed in Iraq, items like aspirin, and insulin, water treatment equipment, and medical journals, despite the fact that, according to UNICEF, the embargo has been responsible for

the deaths of half a million Iraqi children. And finally, there is the affront of US military presence throughout the Middle East region, particularly in Saudi Arabia. The pilots who flew planes into the World Trade Center may have been rich men with little concern for starving children. But Al Qaeda continues to recruit scores of poor young men in countries like Pakistan, Sudan, Indonesia, and all around the globe because these grievances are deeply felt throughout the entire Islamic world.

Please don't misunderstand. I do not believe that any of these things excuse the actions of terrorists. What I do believe is this: we will never be secure as long as we refuse to practice justice around the world, and as long as we answer violence and hatred with more violence and hatred.

Jesus called his followers to order their lives around a new reality, the reality of God's kingdom present among them. They were called to turn their backs on the value systems that oppressed and constrained them, by which they also oppressed others, and to become members of God's family, who take care of one another and manifest a completely different set of values. For some of Jesus' disciples, this meant a total departure from the kinship and economic structures ordering their lives. It meant a decision to drop their nets and "Follow!" For others of Jesus' followers, such as the well-to-do women who supported the traveling disciples (Lk 8:3), it meant an entirely new perspective on possessions and the purposes for which they were to be used. But for all those who became followers of Jesus, it meant that the values of their culture could no longer determine their actions.

Since 9-11, I have been asking, in light of that event and all that it laid bare, what it means for me as an American to step into the flow of God's kingdom, to live according to the values of the kingdom: mercy, sharing, radical generosity, and peacemaking. What does it mean, from where I stand, to participate in God's redemption of all things? As I reflect honestly on these questions, I know that it will involve gradually and dramatically changing my lifestyle and economic choices so that my life is no longer about hoarding the world's resources. When I think about the world into which Jesus was born, I realize that I am most analogous to the elites of Jesus' day. I am one of the privileged few who live off the wealth of the world's majority. I have lived most of my life blindly and selfishly, without much thought to the people behind the products and foods I consume, and

without a thought to the consequences of my wasteful, polluting way of life.

Especially since 9-11, I have come to believe that participating in God's emerging kingdom means reordering my values and habits. It has something to do with burning wood instead of gas to heat my house, and using a lovely little invention called a hot water bottle. It has to do with eating mostly organic foods grown and produced locally, or in a neighboring state, instead of consuming foods that were shipped all around the world before getting to me, leaving a trail of fossil fuel pollution in their wake. It means eating only produce that is in season, even during winter. The kingdom of God has something to do with buying solar panels for our house and researching biodiesel cars, supporting the eventual production of biodiesel fuel in our area. It has a lot to do with supporting organizations promoting micro-development work around the world, helping the poor to build sustainable lives for themselves and their families: organizations like Heifer Project, Int'l and Right Sharing of World Resources. It has to do with drinking fair trade coffee and supporting fair trade, and not supporting the use of sweatshops. This means buying less and recycling what other people discard.

The kingdom of God is about more than economics, but it is about economics, nonetheless. When I hear with new ears Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom into the context of first-century Galilee, I hear a message astoundingly relevant to our times: a message that is painful and unwelcome to those of us who comprise the global elite in our day. Jesus proclaims a message about justice and sharing and caring for the needs of our brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Lord, help us to embrace it!