

JUST FAITH AND ACTION: A BI-MONTHLY THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION FROM THE WASHINGTON OFFICE ON AFRICA

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The advantage of exchanging bananas

Fareth Sendegeya, a Tanzanian friend, and I were in Mauritius together a few weeks ago, having a meal in that fascinating setting where myriad cultures blend together. Such a setting sparked a conversation about hospitality. Not, mind you, hospitality in the superficial sense to which that word has been reduced, but in its profound sense of context for deepening human relationship.

Fareth was telling me that in his own area of Kagera – nestled on the borders of Burundi and Rwanda – he would cut some bananas from the trees around his house and take them with him when he went to visit a friend. His friend, Fareth pointed out, had his own bananas. He didn't need Fareth's. But Fareth brought them nevertheless.

Similarly, when his friend returned the visit, he brought Fareth some beans. Fareth had beans in his own garden. He didn't need those from his friend's. But they exchanged these gifts nevertheless. It was a sign of their relatedness, of their friendship, of their being in community together.

I think this rather simple story captures a critical element in our talk about economic justice. The dominant economic mindset these days would reduce Fareth's story to one of the exchange of commodities. It was an exchange that could not be assessed in terms of "advantage," comparative or otherwise, for there was none. It was thus a meaningless act in economic terms, and why else, the reasoning goes, would anyone exchange goods? But there was a purpose to the exercise. The bananas and beans held a value irrespective of the economic meaninglessness of the exchange. It reminded them, and us, of something we already know, namely that our need to be related takes us far beyond whether it is in our material self-interest to do that which we do with our material resources.

It seems so obvious. And yet our economic justice struggles these days are repeatedly up against a system and an attitude that declares economic considerations not merely to be paramount but singular in decisions about local and global society. Can a nation take exceptional steps to protect the environment? Not if it restricts trade. Can an African nation protect fledgling local industries against international giants? Not if it wants to secure the "benefits" of the African Growth and Opportunity Act. Can Africans take steps legal even from the standpoint of international trade regulations to secure affordable medicines to confront the AIDS tragedy? Not if they want to keep in good stead with the US government. Can they offer free health care and education to an impoverished people? Not by the standards of the international financial institutions. Sure, there are gestures here and there that offer exceptions to these queries. But the sanctification of the free market economy persists in reducing us all to economic entities. If it makes sense economically to do something, we do it; if it doesn't, we don't or can't. And taking bananas to someone who has them becomes just silly. Of course it isn't. Sad, though, that we have to keep saying it's not.

*Yours faithfully,
Leon Spencer*