

The father's pleasure

By [Stan Wilson](#)

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“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms.”

To hear this strangely beautiful instruction addressed to us and not to somebody else requires some imaginative work. To begin, we will need to learn how to hear the scriptures as a church rather than as a collection of individuals. Jesus is talking to a gathered community of followers. He isn’t telling me to sell my possessions; he’s talking us. This will require hard work. We do not yet know how to hear collectively, as one body.

I worshiped recently at Reba Place Church in Evanston, Illinois, a Mennonite congregation in an urban setting. Reba Place is closely associated with an intentional community of the same name. Members of this fellowship have sold possessions, moved into shared space, and practice economic sharing and almsgiving. To worship with Reba Place is to begin to see what it might be to hear and read scripture as a church, rather than as a collection of individuals.

We will need to imagine the church as a political body, not just a spiritual improvement society. “Flock” sounds like a harmless enough word, but it requires a shepherd, and the Good Shepherd in the Bible is a royal figure, a challenge to the king. With some imaginative work, a “little flock” could be seen as a subversive threat to the reigning political order. On the outside wall of Reba Place is the inscription: “God bless our country, our world, our enemies.” The last sentence spoken in worship was, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” When they said it that they were making a political, not just a spiritual claim.

In order to hear the scripture as a church, we will need to imagine an alternative to the reigning economic vision. The kingdom begins with a gift from a Father who is

pleased to give it. A gift is not a pay-off or a hand-out, but something else. It's not easy for us to imagine an economy where such giving is possible. Ours is an economy of market exchanges in which we hardly know the sacrifices that bring us the goods which we consume. A gift requires knowledge of the giver. Our economy is governed by the self-interest of competing individuals, but the economy of the kingdom is built on God's pleasure and selfless donation.

Toward the end of the service at Reba Place there was a time of sharing. Individual members spoke of their needs, and one of them actually asked for monetary help, admitting that she didn't have enough money to meet an important family need. This would have been difficult in my church, where we prefer to remain anonymous with our gifts and needs. We would be reluctant to look the congregation in the eye and ask for help. But Reba's common life enables a whole new economic order to come into view.