

God's economy: subtract or multiply?

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I would never make it as an accountant. I tend to lose focus on details, and I've never been too motivated about dollars and cents. Plus I can get philosophical on something as simple as mathematical functions like subtract or multiply.

What to some might look like subtraction, a reduction in the bottom line, in God's economy can be multiplication, compounding and expanding in every direction. It doesn't make sense mathematically, but there's a spiritual reality that sets our zero-sum economy on end.

I've been watching this happen in my garden, my backyard workshop for theological reflection. Exhibit one: *Dicentra cucullaria*, [Dutchman's Breeches](#), a native woodland plant in the bleeding-heart family, with white spring blooms shaped like tiny upside-down pantaloons.

Years ago someone gave me some corms to plant, little white bulblets that rooted and grew into a small clump of feathery leaves and a handful of early spring blooms. And there it stayed: pretty for a few weeks in spring, not expanding much. Hemmed in by wild ginger on one side, a rock on another, a tree trunk on another.

Then last year I dug it up. I gave a few corms to someone else, stuck a few in a new place, a few more in another. Dropped one or two and left them for the squirrels to find. Then forgot them.

This spring, as the snow finally melted and sunlight warmed the hill behind my shed, I found a new bunch blooming. Then another. A few days later, another. And another. Fifteen patches in all, all bigger than the bunch I split just last year. All blooming merrily in new locations, some apparently chosen by the squirrels, while the corms I put back into the same spot are back to a bunch the same size as before.

In gardening, that's often the case. Divide something up and share it, and you end up with more yourself.

I gave a new friend a garden tour this week, and we ended by potting up plants for her to take home to her own garden. Some bloodroot, heirs of a clump my grandmother gave me decades ago, which grew and multiplied in three different gardens in Virginia and now is spreading through my garden here. Virginia bluebells and ostrich fern from a friend's garden here in Pennsylvania. Rue anemone and native bleeding heart that are woven throughout my yard, even though I don't remember where they came from. And a bunch of *Dicentra cucullaria*, Dutchman's Breeches, the same size as the original I was given years ago.

This is the season of plant sales, garden giveaways, digging and dividing. Real gardeners know that a large part of the fun is giving plants away.

I check the USDA plant databases and plant native plants in the park where I'm part of a Weed Warriors workgroup. A few years ago I bought two elderberry bushes, and now, after giving away at least a dozen, I have another dozen more to dig and plant in the park.

And golden ragwort—brilliant yellow this time of year—a small bunch given by a friend now carpets whole areas under my trees, and under the trees of several friends, and is growing into new patches along the pathways in the park. (And yes, I have permission to plant there, as we take out invasive aliens that don't belong).

Paul [wrote to the Corinthians](#) about this expansive principle in God's economy.

[I've written before](#) about the extreme wording that runs through this passage: "God is able to bless you **abundantly**, so that in **all things** at **all times**, having **all that you need**, you will abound in **every** good work. . . . You will be enriched in **every** way to you can be generous on **every** occasion."

As I've said, "I like the extravagance of Paul's claim: every, always, everything. There is no lack in God's supply, no halfway measure in his provision." We step into this reality tentatively: offering hospitality with hesitation, giving generously, then rethinking, second-guessing.

Yet, when we've chosen as a family to believe it, we've seen that any investment of home, money, time, attention, love, has yielded not scarcity, but plenty, [pressed down and overflowing](#).

I listen to discussions of our federal budget and grieve: by some accounting measures it might make sense to [cut back nutrition assistance](#) for poor families, or to shave our one percent international aid contribution to ever smaller decimals. According to [Bread for the World](#), while the proposed 2016 budget would increase defense spending, trillions of dollars in cuts would come from programs for low-income people.

I listen and grieve. And grieve again, at the discussion surrounding minimum wage, living wage, [how far below the poverty line many full-time workers live](#). By some accounting measure, [the arguments](#) for continuing at the current minimum wage might make sense. But surely there are business leaders who could speak for another point of view? Sharing profits with the lowest earning workers, in God's economy, would not subtract from the bottom line, but provide opportunity to see expanded provision.

The Bible has [much to say](#) about what we would call agriculture: the division of land, the processes of sowing and harvesting, the distribution of food, the value of pruning. In many ways, that agricultural focus intersects with an economic vision: one that calls our current material individualism to account, and offers a radically different structure. During this season of gardening and growth, I'm planning to think about God's economy, and to examine the ways our theology finds its way into checkbooks, business practice, policy, politics. What would happen if we lived the words we say we believe?

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