

Free Markets: A Miracle We Should Be Thankful For

Families across the country are about to celebrate Thanksgiving, expressing gratitude for God's overwhelming grace and abundance. And yet even as we offer thanks to God for his provision—materially, socially, spiritually or otherwise—how often do we pause and reflect on the freedoms and channels God uses in the process?

Will we remember that the very foods we are sure to enjoy on Thanksgiving Day required a great deal of investment, cultivation and risk-taking? Will we reflect with gratitude on the labor it took to grow and harvest, package and ship, market and sell these items? It's but one small window into the innumerable hands working together each and every day in service of the common good.

And will we recognize that this mysterious, creative activity is not only due to human hands, but such dominion and stewardship mirrors that of a Creator God who so loved that He gave?

Whether we talk about this phenomenon in terms of an "invisible hand" (Adam Smith), "spontaneous order" (Hayek), "the magic of the marketplace" (Reagan), or a "great and mysterious collaboration" (Grabill), we'd do well to remember that even as we pour gratitude and honor out to our neighbors, we should be careful that we orient things before and beyond the work of human hands. "The price system is indeed an amazing creation, but of the divine mind," writes Joe Carter. "It's one of God's means of coordinating human activity for the purposes of human flourishing."

At Carpe Diem, Mark Perry dusts off a Jeff Jacoby column that beautifully explains this very point and does so in the

particular context of Thanksgiving. “Isn’t there something wondrous—something almost inexplicable—in the way your Thanksgiving weekend is made possible by the skill and labor of vast numbers of total strangers?” Jacoby writes.

“If that isn’t a miracle,” he continues, “what should we call it?” He adds:

To bring that turkey to the dining room table, for example, required the efforts of thousands of people—the poultry farmers who raised the birds, of course, but also the feed distributors who supplied their nourishment and the truckers who brought it to the farm, not to mention the architect who designed the hatchery, the workmen who built it and the technicians who keep it running. The bird had to be slaughtered and defeathered and inspected and transported and unloaded and wrapped and priced and displayed. The people who accomplished those tasks were supported in turn by armies of other people accomplishing other tasks— from refining the gasoline that fueled the trucks to manufacturing the plastic in which the meat was packaged.

The activities of countless far-flung men and women over the course of many months had to be intricately choreographed and precisely timed, so that when you showed up to buy a fresh Thanksgiving turkey, there would be one—or more likely, a few dozen—waiting. The level of coordination required to pull it off is mind-boggling. But what is even more mind-boggling is this: No one coordinated it.

Adam Smith called it “the invisible hand”—the mysterious power that leads innumerable people, each working for his own gain, to promote ends that benefit many. Out of the seeming chaos of millions of uncoordinated private transactions emerges the spontaneous order of the market. Free human beings freely interact, and the result is an array of goods and services more immense than the human mind can comprehend. No dictator, no bureaucracy, no

supercomputer plans it in advance. Indeed, the more an economy is planned, the more it is plagued by shortages, dislocation and failure.

It is commonplace to speak of seeing God's signature in the intricacy of a spider's web or the animation of a beehive. But they pale in comparison to the kaleidoscopic energy and productivity of the free market. If it is a blessing from heaven when seeds are transformed into grain, how much more of a blessing is it when our private, voluntary exchanges are transformed—without our ever intending it—into prosperity, innovation and growth?

Though Jacoby admits to seeing God's signature in the mysteries of human trade and exchange, we ought to be bolder still in recognizing God's role not as some mysterious "force" behind it all but as an active, personal participant in pursuit of partnership. In his book, *Work: The Meaning of Your Life*, Lester DeKoster connects these dots more clearly, pointing all our labor and exchange to the Creator himself:

Culture and civilization don't just happen. They are made to happen and to keep happening—by God the Holy Spirit, through our work ... As seeds multiply themselves into harvest, so work flowers into civilization. The second harvest parallels the first: Civilization, like the fertile fields, yields far more in return on our efforts than our particular jobs put in...

Work plants the seed; civilization reaps the harvest. Work is the form in which we make ourselves useful to others; civilization is the form in which others make themselves useful to us. We plant; God gives the increase to unify the human race.

This Thanksgiving and every day thereafter, let us be joyful and thankful not only for immediate family and friendships and the types of provision we can touch and taste, but also for

the social order of freedom that enables these and so much else, both here and across the world.

More importantly, let us thank the miracle-working God who gave us these gifts, who entrusted us with authority and dominion, and who partners with us through the power of His Spirit to work in freedom and love in his various economies for the life of the world. {eoe}

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