

Lent,
Poverty,
And Christian
Theology

What do you think?

By
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Introduction

Poverty, people who are poor, the poverty line. Affordable housing, people who are homeless, food pantries, soup kitchens, Toys for Tots. Immigrants, addictions, mental illness. Domestic violence. The high cost of vegetables, the impossible cost of health care.

What comes to your mind when you think of poverty? What is your story of living with or near poverty, and how does that influence your view of poverty today? And what do you think of when you imagine the Christian response to poverty?

This Lenten season, we are looking at the biblical foundations for our understanding of what poverty is, what causes poverty, and how are we, as Christians, called to respond to poverty?

The stories in this study are from my time as pastor of Worcester Fellowship, a street church in Worcester, Massachusetts. The congregation is made up of thirty to one hundred adults who don't have homes, or who are living on the edge of homelessness. I created the church in 2007 and left in 2014. The ministry continues to share lunch and worship outside every Sunday and is a church within the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The goal for this course is for individuals, and members of churches, to explore together our own theologies of poverty. What does it mean to U.S. Christians that poverty exists in our nation? Our experience in the United States is not the same as the experience of those in Southern Hemisphere, but I find Gutiérrez effective for guiding our conversations.

Gutiérrez on Poverty

This study is based on the last chapter of Gustavo Gutiérrez' book *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (15th anniversary edition, Orbis, 1988), translated by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson. The book introduces the language of Liberation Theology by exploring the work of the Catholic Lay Movements in Central and South America. He introduces the possibility that God is, and Christians should be, especially concerned with people who are poor. He wants us to ask what systems create poverty, and for churches, and the church, to be intentional about figuring how to be in solidarity with the poor in the same way that God chose solidarity with all people in the incarnation.

The final chapter of Gutiérrez' book (*Poverty: Solidarity and Protest*) compares the biblical concepts of material poverty with the idea of spiritual poverty, and uses that to insist that we recognize that voluntary and involuntary poverty are not the same. Material poverty is the result of oppression; spiritual poverty is a child-like attention to God, regardless of one's material resources.

His conclusion is that "[o]nly authentic solidarity with the poor and a real protest against the poverty of our time can provide the concrete, vital context necessary for a theological discussion of poverty" (Gutiérrez 173).

Outline of the Study

Introduction

1. Ash Wednesday
2. What is Material Poverty?
3. What do the Prophets tell us?
4. What is the responsibility of the Rich?
5. What is Spiritual Poverty?
6. Relational Ministries
7. What can we do?

Good Friday

Week one includes Ash Wednesday. You may start your Lenten Study that week, if so there are readings and questions for that study. For some congregations your Ash Wednesday service will fill your Lenten Study spot. There is the outline of an Ash Wednesday service included, and you can use the commentary in the study as help for sermon preparation. Either way, the future weeks of the study are not dependent on you using any of the material from this session.

In the second week we get at what are stereotypes are about material poverty, and what Gutiérrez has to contribute to this conversation. The third week will get to what the prophets tell us. Gutiérrez offers an extensive list of prophetic verses about poverty, I have included those in the "Aside" section. This study will focus on the book of Micah.

Gutiérrez offers little critique or commentary on people who are rich in this chapter, but to understand his ideas of solidarity we must grapple with the verses he provides, and with our own understanding of wealth. We'll do that in week four. That will set us up for week five and investigating spiritual poverty in contrast to material poverty.

We'll turn to the beatitudes in week six, and the question of building relationships as we engage in ministry with people who are poor. All of this provides the foundation for a discussion in week seven about the role of charity, community, and government as solutions to poverty. It will be helpful for the leader to have researched local community organizations that address poverty as possible resources for your group to think about.

This study closes with a structure for creating a Good Friday stations of the cross that visit locations of violence, destruction, and loss for the poor of your community. If you wish to do this you'll need to start planning, and researching the locations at the start of Lent.

Outside of Ash Wednesday, the study includes these parts

1. Opening Prayer
2. Opening Quote from Gutiérrez
3. Opening Question(s)
4. A Story
5. Commentary with questions.
6. Bible Study with Questions

Please feel free to make a copy for each member of your study group to take home. The study is intended for the users to read between sessions, but should be short enough that you can read during the study, or for the leader to summarize the content for those who did not do the reading.

The Bible Texts are included in the study versions, but not the leaders versions. They are NRSVUE, but you should feel to use the translation appropriate for your congregation. Some weeks have more than one scripture to study, on those weeks you can use small groups if you have a lot of people, or a short amount of time.

I have attempted to create a study that works even when some people come irregularly, but it will work best if there are a few people who are a steady presence to carry the ideas from one week to another.

Most sessions have an Aside, covering material that is related, may be interesting, but will not fit into that session. You can expand your study over additional weeks to include that material or just let those interested do that reading.

This is a draft. I hope that you will feel comfortable reporting how your study went--what was too long, too confusing, too controversial, or just didn't work in your context. It would be helpful to have demographics of the group you tried it with. It's helpful to tell me things that worked well, too!

ONE: Ash Wednesday

This study provides two choices for Ash Wednesday: an order of worship focusing on poverty, and a study of the idea of Ash Wednesday with a focus on poverty. You may choose one or both of these depending on your congregation's schedule.

For the study, start with the opening prayer and quote, and the opening question. Then proceed to read the sermon prep materials, and engage the discussion questions from that. Afterward, turn to the scripture for a discussion of that. You may choose to also do a discussion of the "What's the point" to discuss the meaning of Ash Wednesday.

For the worship service, an abbreviated order is included. For traditions that include a full service, you would continue with the either A Service of the Word, or the service of Word and Sacrament, leaving out the items already covered. However, the order included is sufficient for Ash Wednesday in many traditions. The scripture commentary is intended for you to use as support for your sermon.

Depending on your congregation's experience with Ash Wednesday, you may choose to include the material in "What's The Point" into your sermon, or in an opening to the service. You also could use that material as part of your promotion of the upcoming service.

Opening Prayer

God, who created us from dust, we turn to you looking for your breath which makes us human. Guide us to see the humanity in all the world.

Opening Quote

[Christ] does not take on the human sinful condition and its consequences to idealize it. It is rather because of love for and solidarity with others who suffer in it. It is to redeem them from their sin and to enrich them with his poverty. It is to struggle against human selfishness and everything that divides persons and allows that there will be rich and poor, possessors and dispossessed, oppressors and oppressed. (Gutiérrez 172)

A Story

I was leading outdoor worship with my neighbors who do not have homes. When we came to communion, I left the worship circle, carrying a wooden tray with little cups of grape juice, and squares of bread out into Worcester Common, toward the folk simply hanging out in the park.

I came up to a woman on a bench.

"Do you want communion?"

"What?" The woman looked up from her book.

"Communion. Do you want the cup of forgiveness?"

She looked surprised. "I need that!"

I giggled. "Me too. Will you serve me?"

And we shared.

Discussion

1. How are forgiveness and lent connected for you?

What's the point?

What is the point of Ash Wednesday? In the earliest Christian Tradition, candidates for Baptism prepared for years. Baptism took place on Easter Sunday and the candidates were tested for the weeks leading up to Easter. Thus the weeks before Easter were spent in self-examination. It was around 325 CE that this time of reflection was connected to Jesus' forty days of testing in the wilderness.

Ash Wednesday has developed into a time we reflect on death, mourning, and the start a lent where we give up some of beloved or luxurious thing. As we are reminded that we are made of dust, and that we will return to dust at our death, we read scriptures that implore us not to make a show of our faith while at the same time oppressing our neighbors. Thus the message of Ash Wednesday is about returning to our faith. In some ways the emphasis on our physical bodies with ashes and dust reminds us that everyone has physical needs. And for those who are poor, the basic needs of food, housing, and healthcare are often unfulfilled.

Discussion

2. Have you been part of a church that includes Ash Wednesday services?

What does it mean to you?

3. How do you feel that Ash Wednesday, Lent, and Poverty are connected to each other?

Commentary on the Scripture

Isaiah 58 starts out by encouraging the prophet to "lift your voice like a trumpet" in our warning to the people of God. People seek God, pretending like they haven't broken the covenant. Thus the people are doing religious actions (fasting, humbling themselves) at the same time as they are oppressing workers and getting into fights.

God is having none of it. Don't go putting ashes on your head (and wearing mournful clothing) if you aren't going to do the other parts of the covenant. This is what God wants: ending injustice, ending oppression, and getting rid of heavy burdens of poverty such as homelessness, hunger, nakedness.

And, God goes on, if you do *these* things, then when you call on God, God will answer your call from help. "Your light shall rise from the [shadows] and your gloom will be like noonday" (v. 10). You become "the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in" (v. 12). We open Lent with a call to fix the streets, the neighborhood, the community we live in.

The *Repairers of the Breach* is an organization started in 2015 by The Rev. Dr. William Barber, aimed at changing the United States by centering the voices of the oppressed while confronting injustice. "Our approach is informed by our faith traditions and the Constitution, which require us to confront injustice through sustained action." Started in North Carolina before going national, it is one of the foundations of the *Poor People's Campaign*.

"[T]oday's Poor People's Campaign is a growing national movement organized to challenge the interlocking issues of systemic racism, systemic poverty, the war economy, ecological devastation, and the distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism." In 1968 The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King started a national program to gather poor people of all backgrounds in fighting poverty in the United States. Today's campaign is meant to carry on that work, trusting that we can find commonality across our differences when working to remove the oppression of poverty. God's people are oppressed and we as the church, as God's people, are called to end that oppression in every way possible.

The Poor People's Campaign is overtly political. Indeed it could be argued that the prophet Isaiah is overtly political. The prophet calls for the leadership to stop expecting a strong nation, especially to stop expecting God to rescue them,

when they are failing at the most basic duty of a nation—the care of those who do not have enough. We can ask ourselves whether we as a nation, as a community, as a church, and as individuals, are doing enough to care for those who are poor.

As churches, as communities, as followers of Christ, we are called to get to know people who are poor so that we can be part of the solution to poverty. For when we know the people in need, we can work together in our community to provide the services people need, and we can work together in elections to get the leadership we need to repair the breach, to restore the streets of our cities and towns. The ashes on our foreheads reminds us of our need to do this work to care for the bodies of God’s people.

Discussion

4. What do you know or remember of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s work? How much does your congregation focus on his work?

5. Where do you think the role of Government intermixes with the work of the church and of individuals around the systems that cause poverty?

Scripture

Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout out; do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. 2 Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they want God on their side.

3 “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers. 4 You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. 5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your

own kin? 8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. 9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am."

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, 10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. 11 The Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in parched places and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail. 12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Discussion

6. What is meant by these phrases? Verse 6-7 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

7. In this text God essentially says God will rebuild the destroyed nation if they take care care for the least of these. Is that your image of how God works?

8. What else stands out for you about this text?

Ash Wednesday Order of Worship

OPENING Jesus came to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate those who are oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of God's favor. (UCC book of worship, 180)

HYMN

SCRIPTURE Isaiah 58:1-12

WORDS OF REFLECTION

HYMN

CONFESSION Forgive us, God, for the ways we have failed to serve the poor
and failed to end poverty.

We confess our sins and ask for forgiveness.

Forgive us, God, for the ways that we look away, for the relationships we
have failed to initiate.

We confess our sins and ask for forgiveness.

Forgive us, God, for the times we assume that poverty was meant to be.

We confess our sins and ask for forgiveness.

Forgive us, God, for the times we hold onto things, and let "stuff" keep us
from others, and from you.

We confess our sins and ask for forgiveness.

A time of silent confession.

Restore us, God, and redeem us in your eyes. Guide us to be your people,
attentive to the poor among us. Guide us to care for all those in need.

RECEIVING ASHES

*Invite the congregation forward to receive ashes, perhaps noting that whatever our
material resources, we all are made from clay, breathed upon by God, and when we die
our bodies will return to the earth and our souls will return to God. You may offer ashes
on people's hands or foreheads.*

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

WORDS OF GRACE Jesus, the anointed one, lived and died and was
resurrected so that we might be free from our sins and able to bring God's rule to
all of the world. Your sins are forgiven. Pick up your mat and go into the world
doing good for those that are poor or oppressed.

In many traditions the regular Sunday Service of the Word, or Eucharistic Service, would follow here.

HYMN

BENEDICTION

Credits

The Worship Service is loosely based on the UCC Book of worship.

Find more about the the Repairers of the Breach at www.breachrepairers.org

Find out more about the Poor People's Campaign at www.poorpeoplescampaign.org

TWO: What is Material Poverty?

Opening Prayer

Holy God of abundance, help us to see those who do not have enough. Help us to understand the stories we have been told, and to find your story among the poor. Amen.

Opening Quote

"The term *poverty* designates in the first place *material poverty*, that is, the lack of economic goods necessary for human life worthy of the name. In this sense poverty is considered degrading and is rejected by the conscience of contemporary persons. Even those who are not—or do not wish to be—aware of the root causes of poverty believe it should be struggled against" (Gutiérrez 163).

A Story

I was sitting at common art, the weekly gathering that is part of the street church common cathedral, part of Ecclesia Ministries in Boston. We gather every week at a local church to share art together.

At my table we were painting.

"Where is Caleb?" Sue asked.

"I haven't seen him lately." Ana paused to dip her brush in the water. "Did you hear he won the lottery?"

"Get out!"

"Like \$10,00!" Ana picked up a glob of red paint and turned back to the picture she was working on. "My whole life would be different with \$10,000."

The conversation continued, first to where Caleb might be, and then with ideas of what they would do if they won the lottery. My internal dialogue was going in more judgmental ways. "They have no idea what little difference \$10,000 would make" and "Spend your money on the lottery and you'll never get ahead" and "What could you even do with \$10,000?"

I was new to street ministry at this point. Little did I know how much I had to learn about money. And how valuable it would be for someone who is homeless to have access to \$10,000.

Opening Questions

We open this week with our own impressions of poverty. Start with a go-around, or if you have a large group, break into smaller groups.

1. What is your experience with poverty in your youth? Did you live in it or near it? What were you told about poverty by adults around you, either in words or in attitude?

For the next question, popcorn the responses, and write them on chart paper, a black board, or a piece of paper everyone can see. As you are writing the responses, put negative responses onto the list on the right, and the more positive responses on the left side of the sheet, creating two columns. When people disagree, remind them this is many people's ideas, and list all the words that come up. Note that some groups will resist saying the stereotypes. You should offer some to get them started. Lazy. Dishonest. Addicts.

2. How would people around you describe poor people?

Follow-up with a discussion of the words listed. Pick out some of the words and ask: Is this true? Why do you think people say this? What is gained from these stereotypes?

The responses to the next question will vary based on the biblical knowledge of your group. You may want to supply the three texts we are talking about this week rather than ask them to come up with them.

3. What are some scriptures you can think of that talk about people who are poor?

Scriptures

Your group may have listed many different scriptures, and if you have time you may want to look up several of the ones that people thought of. I have picked out three that are commonly on the top of Christian's minds when considering poverty.

If you have a short time, or a large group, divide into three groups to look separately at each of these. For a small group, you might look at them all together.

A) The poor will always be with you. Mark 14:3-9.

B) The sheep and the goats. Matthew 25:31-46.

C) The widows mite. Luke 21:1-4

A) Mark 14:3-9

While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. 4 But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? 5 For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. 6 But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. 7 For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish, but you will not always have me. 8 She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. 9 Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

Discussion

4. Consider what the text is saying. What was the purpose of the writer including this story?

5. What does this text say, or imply, about poverty? Do you think that was the intention of the writer? Do you agree with the meaning it implies?

6. There are hundreds of texts in the Bible mentioning poverty and being poor. Why do you think these, or the others your group thought of, are the ones that come to mind first?

B) Matthew 25:31-46

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before

him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.'

41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' 44 Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?' 45 Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life."

Discussion

4. Consider what the text is saying. What was the purpose of the writer including this story?

5. What does this text say, or imply, about poverty? Do you think that was the intention of the writer? Do you agree with the meaning it implies?

6. There are hundreds of texts in the Bible mentioning poverty and being poor. Why do you think these, or the others your group thought of, are the ones that come to mind first?

C) Luke 21:1-4

Jesus looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; 2 he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. 3 He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them, 4 for all of them have

contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

Discussion

4. Consider what the text is saying. What was the purpose of the writer including this story?

5. What does this text say, or imply, about poverty? Do you think that was the intention of the writer? Do you agree with the meaning it implies?

6. There are hundreds of texts in the Bible mentioning poverty and being poor. Why do you think these, or the others your group thought of, are the ones that come to mind first?

Commentary

These three scriptures create an interesting view of poverty. The first is used politically, and in churches, to argue that we cannot do anything about poverty. If Jesus said we'd always have poor people, surely he knows, right?

Yet the story of the sheep and the goats suggests that we are required to give resources—food, water, clothing, and services—healing and visits, to people who are poor. The story also identifies the poor as an anonymous "least of these". Although the text opens as a "judgment of the nations" most people read it as being about individual charity.

The story of the widows mite suggests that even the poorest of the poor can give something to our church, and that we should recognize that giving as better than the giving by those of us who have excess.

Together the three create an image of people who are poor as noble in their poverty, not one of us—rather a subject of our mission, and their poverty as inevitable. Thus we should feed people who poor, comfort them, but perhaps not necessarily change the condition of poverty. They are not one of us, but are something else, and we are called to minister to “them”.

Discussion

7. How can we change the story of poverty so that we are not thinking about “us” as different from “them”?

Commentary from Gutiérrez

Gutiérrez offers three biblical principals that support his view that Christians should be working against the forces that create poverty.

First, he argues, poverty contradicts the work of God through Moses. God freed God's people from exploitation and slavery because God wanted them to be able to live with dignity (Gutiérrez 167). To allow continued humiliation and degradation is to allow God's work to come undone. Allowing poverty to exist is allowing God's people to be exploited.

Second, poverty goes against God's creation of people. God made us human, and in God's image; thus poverty dehumanizes people, which distorts the image of God's creation. God's creation (168). Although Gutiérrez doesn't say this directly, God created humans among bounty. The loss of that bounty is part of the fall of humankind. Jesus, as the new Adam, has restored human kind. When we allow poverty to exist, we lose our glimpse of the bounty of God's creation.

And finally, "to oppress the poor is to offend God" (168). We cannot make a claim to loving our neighbor if we are allowing our neighbor to be oppressed by poverty. Poverty is the opposite of love, and incompatible with God's Rule (Gutiérrez 168). God's rule is one of bounty, of sharing, and of supporting those who are in need.

Discussion

8. What do you think of Gutiérrez' biblical principals?

THREE: What do the Prophets Tell Us?

Opening Prayer

God of the past, guide us as we learn from your prophets. Help us to see with new eyes and hear with new ears, your message to our nations. Amen.

Opening Quote

“In the Bible poverty is a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God” (Gutiérrez 165).

A Story

We did a Micah Study at Worcester Fellowship, progressing through one chapter each week. Micah is a prophet writing to his community about hope and about doom. We asked about each chapter: is this hope or is it doom? Chapter one? Clearly doom. Micah is predicting suffering and loss for everyone. What a bright and cheery message!

We went over some of the setting and noted how similar those times were to today: that the rich have the money and the power, their sense of satisfaction and righteousness. That the poor have, well, the poor have nothing. They have dissatisfaction and hopelessness. The poor have peace, and religion, and family, and friends, but the rich don't seem to notice that the poor have no way to get ahead, no work, no supports, not enough food, not enough housing. Micah's message is addressed to those in power: your doom is coming. For the wealthy: doom is coming; for the poor: doom is now.

But Bible study at Worcester Fellowship isn't really about tussling with the setting or about understanding the goals of a prophet, and it really isn't about the predicted destruction of Jerusalem. We explored the question: "have you ever felt a sense of doom?"

First we talked about Korea and nuclear war and terrorists. The middle east, Ukraine, Sudan. Brian wants to go into the Navy and he's concerned the he will be involved in one of these wars . Mark lives with the challenges of paranoia and has to check every floor of his building every evening before he can sleep because of all the news about the threat of terrorists and mass shootings. He describes how media reinforces his fears, even as he knows that his building in

Worcester isn't a likely target.

Alison worries about her son who is in Basic Training. Estella shared about the violence in her home after father returned from the war Korea. Sandy mentioned how hard it is to stay sober in the evenings when she is alone. Alison described her struggle with depression; Ron how his regular seizures are stealing more and more of his brain. Juan said that his biggest sense of doom comes from his addictions.

There was instant agreement with the doom of addiction and many examples. How you try so hard for days and days and then one day you are late for the food pantry so you don't have food and you get a few bucks and you have another drink. How you try to stay in the house to stay away from others who are using and your mind gets more and more convoluted as you get more and more isolated and you just want to die. How you go to meetings and church and bible study and see your social worker and then your therapist, but then there it is, 2 am and you are awake and you can't remember any of the reasons why you were trying to get sober. And how a long night is followed by waking up in the morning afraid that you won't make it another day.

Brian asked "what is that saying... you know about if you do and if you don't?"

Alison replied quickly "doomed if you do, doomed if you don't."

Mark was sure that wasn't right "No, it's damned if you do, damned if you don't." He sighs. "Excuse me pastor, sorry for the language."

After a moment of silence Estella summarized the study. "I think Micah would say doomed if you do, doomed if you don't."

Discussion

- 1. What are we taught the causes of poverty in the United States?**
- 2. How is poverty more about individual behaviors? How is it about our community?**

Commentary from Gutiérrez

Gutiérrez looks at the Hebrew words used to describe poverty. Words about poverty occur throughout the Hebrew Bible, but especially in the prophets, and the psalms. The writers sometimes use the neutral word, *rash* to describe poverty (Gutiérrez 165). However, more common are words that imply that poverty is not neutral, but rather is inhuman, and is caused by those who have power and

authority.

Someone who waits, or begs for someone to provide for them is from the word *ébyôn*. The word *dal* describes someone who is weak or frail and is found in Job and Proverbs in addition to the prophets; a typical phrase is *the poor of the land*. The most common term, *ani*, carries the implication of being bent over, lacking strength, or humiliated. In the Greek New Testament we find thirty-four instances of *ptokós*, someone who is wretched, and begging, not even reaching subsistence levels of existence (Gutiérrez 165, 252).

The prophets use the word poverty with indignation—they are angry with the injustice perpetrated, and declare that God judges the nation on how it has cared for the poor and the alien (Gutiérrez 165). Using a study of the Hebrew Bible, Gutiérrez finds three causes of poverty: fraudulent commerce, hoarding of resources, and dishonest courts. These three behaviors cause the poverty in the nation.

Discussion

3. What does it mean that there are all these different words in Hebrew that we translate to mean poor in English? Do we have words in English that might differentiate between different types of material poverty?

Introduction to Micah

The Hebrew Prophets are speaking to their nation about upcoming destruction of their people, or the upcoming salvation from the already existing destruction. For the most part they are not outsiders, condemning "those other people," but members of the nation, observing what is happening around them. They use the image of God as controller of the universe to suggest that all that the upcoming action is a result of God's judgement. God judges based on the nation's fidelity to their covenant with God, and based on how they treat people in need. In many cases fidelity to the covenant *is* care of the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the foreigner.

The prophet sees how the leadership is behaving and responds with predictions of destruction of the people (and then later, their redemption.) Since the prophetic writings we have were edited after the doom they anticipate, they appear to be skilled at prediction of the future. It is important to remember that that was never the prophets goal. The point of the prophets' speeches were to encourage their community to change. In essence, they see the consequences of the nation's failure to live righteously.

Micah, an eighth century BCE prophet living in a village in Judah during a

time when Assyria is regularly attacking the nation. Micah describes these attacks as punishment by God for the way the leadership of Judah oppresses the poor. The book we have was likely edited in the fifth century BCE, which then is concerned with the destruction of Judah by the Babylonian empire. The prophet, and the editors, intermix the hope that the nation might change its ways with lament that over the upcoming doom.

Discussion

4. What might prophets today describe as our doom? What might they say about hope?

Scriptures

Depending on the size of your group and the time for your study, divide into three groups to study the three texts, or take one after the other.

Our biblical texts suggest that poverty is created by

- A) Fraudulent commerce and exploitation,
- B) Hoarding Lands, and
- C) Dishonest Courts.

A) Condemning Fraudulent commerce and exploitation

Micah 6:8-13

He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?

9 The voice of the Lord cries to the city (and he shall save those who fear his name): Hear, O tribe and assembly of the city! 10 Can I forget the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked and the despicable false measure? 11 Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights? 12 Your wealthy are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies with tongues of deceit in their mouths. Therefore I have begun to strike you down, making you desolate because of your sins.

Discussion

5. What is the violence of the wealthy in this text? Who will be stricken down? What does it mean to “cry to the city”?

6. What was this text saying when it was written? How could this apply to today?

7. What does this tell us about the biblical view of poverty?

B) Hoarding Lands

Micah 2:1-3

1 Woe to those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. 2 They covet fields and seize them, houses and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance.

3 Therefore thus says the Lord: Now, I am devising against this family an evil from which you cannot remove your necks, and you shall not walk arrogantly, for it will be an evil time .

Commentary

Gutiérrez comments that “God is the only owner of the land” (168). In this text, those with power are seizing homes and fields from people who inherited them. Right now in the United States the courts are defending the right to private property, refusing eminent domain decisions where the town or county wants the land for the good of the whole community.

One reading of this text is that the property belongs to “the people” rather than to “a person”. The people and their inheritance are the whole group of people who were given the land by God after the exodus.

Discussion

8. What is the view of power in this text? What does it mean by inheritance?

9. What was this text saying when it was written? How could this apply to today?

10. What does this tell us about the biblical view of poverty?

C) Dishonest Courts

Micah 3:9-11

9 Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, 10 who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! 11 Its rulers give judgment for a bribe; its priests teach for a price; its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the Lord and say, “Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us.”

Commentary

In this text, the rulers think that because they are leading God's people, they can trust that they will not face harm. But the prophet is reminding them of the things they are doing that are not what God wants. Judgement is coming.

Discussion

11. What is going on in verse 11? What is equity in verse 9?
12. What was this text saying when it was written? How could this apply to today?
13. What does this tell us about the biblical view of poverty?

Aside

Gutierrez provides a list of texts concerning the causes of poverty.

Condemning Fraudulent commerce and exploitation

Hos 12:8, 12:2

Amos 8:2b-7

Isa 3:12-15

Jer 5:26-29

Hoarding Lands

Ezek 22:29-30

Hab 2:5-6

Dishonest Courts

Amos 5:7

Jer 22:13-17

FOUR:

What is the Responsibility of the Rich?

Opening Prayer

God of humility, be with us as we explore the abundance of the world around us, and seek to understand the role of wealth in our lives. Amen.

Opening Quote

“The rejection of the exploitation of some by others is found in the very roots of the people of Israel” (Gutiérrez 168).

A Story

John was a volunteer at Worcester Fellowship. He came about once a month and helped with the worship service, with pastoral care, and did street ministry with us. He had a long career in financial services of some sort, and then went back to school for his MDiv and then ordination.

One Sunday when I was on vacation John was scheduled to preach, but didn't show up for worship. One of our leadership team worried that John might have forgotten and gave him a call. Someone we didn't know answered the phone-- John had been out on his bike, and this stranger found him on the ground at the side of the bike trail, unconscious. The stranger called 911, and then John's phone rang.

The leadership team and another pastor that was visiting made worship happen at Worcester Fellowship and the community prayer for John. He gained consciousness a few days later and began the slow recovery from his heart attack. About a month later we reported during worship that John was still in rehab, but that it looked like he would fully recover.

That afternoon our leadership meeting was deciding what to do with our offering. The community takes an offering and once a year decides what to do with it. We spend 90% on things that congregation needs--one year we got bus passes, for example. The other 10% is a donation to another organization. It is our tithe. So we were discussing where to send our tithe. This year it was about \$60.

After several organizations were suggested, Mark raised his hand. "I think we

should send it to John."

John? I couldn't connect what he was saying.

Mark continued. "John is doing well in rehab, but he's gone a whole month without any pay. And I don't know if his wife has a job? But they must need money."

My brain swirled with things to say. For one thing, in my culture, you don't give individuals money. You give money to organizations. I wanted to say something about how you give money to organizations, not individuals. But why do I have that culture? Why should this group follow my culture. I knew that this was just a bias on my part.

At the same time, John was like me. Actually probably had much more savings than I have. John and I live in a world where being in Rehab for a month was not enough to make it so we didn't have money. For one thing, we had salaried, not hourly jobs. So when we are sick we keep getting paid. Even Worcester Fellowship, a tiny non-profit on a limited budgeted kept paying me for a three months after my concussion.

John and I are also old enough that we have savings for retirement--he was already living on those savings, which were all he needed for his well-being.

Yes, many middle class people have medical emergencies that bankrupt them. It is actually a significant cause of poverty. But those are not \$60 disasters.

Discussion Questions

1. What is your experience with wealth in your youth? Did you live in it or near it? What were you told about wealth by adults around you, either in words or in attitude?

For the next question, popcorn the responses, and write them on chart paper, a black board, or a piece of paper everyone can see. As you are writing the responses, put negative responses onto the list on the right, and the more positive responses on the left side of the sheet, creating two columns. When people disagree, remind them this is many people's ideas, and list all the words that come up.

2. How would people around you describe wealthy people? What's the difference between wealthy and middle class?

Follow-up with a discussion of the words listed. Pick out some of the words and ask:

3. Are these true? Why do you think people say this? What is gained from these stereotypes?

Commentary

One of the challenges of looking at the biblical view of wealth is that wealth and poverty at the time of our scriptures is very different than it is today. It is estimated that 80% of people were destitute in the first century—they were day laborers who only ate on the days they worked. A small population was poor but gainfully employed—the Jesus' father Joseph is identified as a “professional,” father than a day laborer.

The rich had a great deal of money—an excess. In fact at that time the very definition of rich implied that a family was storing up extras that should have been shared with the community—by leaving crops at the side of the field, by paying the priests, and by hiring people to do work. It was the duty of those with wealth to pay salaries to those who needed to work to live. If they instead saved up that wealth, they were failing to live up to what is right. “Acquisition was, by its very nature, understood [in the first century Roman Empire] as stealing” (Malina 48).

Note that the wealthy (understood as greedy) were not to avoid this by giving away money in the form of charity. While there were beggars on the streets, and people with plenty may have given to beggars, the idea of charity tables and giving to people who are poor as a practice was not yet developed in Jesus' time. What the rich were supposed to do with resources they had beyond their need was to hire people to do work in their home, in their fields, at their business, so that more people were employed, and therefore could work to buy food. What you were to do with excess is *spend* rather than *save*.

A challenge is that we don't really know what Jesus thinks about those of us who are part of the modern middle class. The average *household* income in the United States was \$74,580/year in 2022. That's also just a bit more than what people need to have a steady supply of food, housing, schooling, and to be able to handle a minor health emergency in U.S. cities. It's enough to get by. This is household income and varies by location. This gives us some guidance as to whether we are included in the people who should be saving less and spending more in support of neighbors.

Discussion

The responses to the next question will vary based on the biblical knowledge of your group. If your group is not confident in the biblical knowledge, you may want to supply the three texts we are talking about this week rather than ask them to come up with them.

4. What are some scriptures you can think of that talk about people who are wealthy?

Scriptures

The Gospel of Luke seems to be directed at people who have enough resources and is especially replete with condemnations of wealth. James' letter is also very specific in its concern over the way the community is treating those who are wealthy.

Luke 6:24-25

24 "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

25 "Woe to you who are full now for you will be hungry.

"Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

Discussion

5. What did this mean at the time it was written? What does it mean to us today?

6. What's the difference between being "blessed" and "woe to you".

Luke 12:13-21

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." 14 But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" 15 And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." 16 Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17 And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' 18 Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' 20 But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' 21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Discussion

7. What did this mean at the time it was written? What does it mean to us today?

8. Is it okay to save money? Why? In what circumstances?

James 2:1-9

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. 2 Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor person. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into the courts? 7 Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

8 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well. 9 But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

Discussion

9. What did this mean at the time it was written? What does it mean to us today?

10. What do you think was going in the church James was part of?

Aside

Other Scriptures about the Rich

Matthew 2:24-26 The Temple Tax

Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25 The Eye of the Needle

Luke 2 Magnificat

Luke 16:19-31 The rich man and Lazarus.

Luke 18:18-26 The rich ruler who wants eternal life

James 4:13-17 Boasting about making money tomorrow

James 5:1-6 Rich people weep and wail

Prosperity Gospel texts

Matthew 25:14–30: the Parable of the talents

John 10:10: "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." (KJV)

Philippians 4:19: "My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus." (KJV)

3 John 1:2: "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." (KJV)

Malachi 3:10: "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it." (KJV)

Credits

<https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2023/demo/p60-279.html>

<https://www.cnbc.com/2023/04/04/the-salary-you-need-to-live-comfortably-in-15-major-us-cities.html#:~:text=Securing%20both%20financial%20success%20and,to%20recent%20data%20from%20SmartAsset.>

"Rich, Poor, and Limited Good" pages 48 to 49 in Richard Molina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.

FIVE: What is Spiritual Poverty?

Opening Prayer

God of the children, help us to find child-like humility, and to be open to receive you into our lives.

Opening Quote

"Spiritual poverty is a precondition for approaching God" (Gutiérrez 169).

A Story

Alyssa was a older woman at Worcester Fellowship. My age. She loved the program, listened raptly at worship, always offered prayers for others in the community, never missed bible study.

She was also very bossy. And very loud. Because she was small and wore kid sized glasses, she could be mistaken in the moment for a child. And, in the way of a child, she was very cute, and at the same time, very annoying.

Eventually we heard the story of growing up in a church that considered her unable to understand the faith. Thus she was denied communion when her friends and family were celebrating. The priest determined that she didn't understand what was going on well enough to take part. This was forty years ago, and she still remembers the experience of being excluded. She felt, and still feels shame around this.

She also wanted to follow the rules, and so had been going to Worcester Fellowship for a long time before she asked us, privately, for permission to take communion. Our table is open and eventually she was among the members who took a turn serving others the broken bread and little cups of grape juice. I never asked what she understood about it, just trusted that she wanted to know God better.

One Advent bible study we were discussing the Christmas story. When we read the story Alyssa stopped us. "But no, you have to have sex to get pregnant." She blushed and looked around at the others.

John popped up quickly. "Mary didn't have sex. Mary was a virgin."

Alyssa was silent, thinking.

Looking over at Alyssa John added: "A virgin means she didn't have sex."

"But Joseph was Jesus' father, right. She had to have sex with Joseph."

Mark interjected "Not really, because they didn't have sex." Several people at the table were snickering now.

Alyssa's voice got a little louder, like she was trying to keep herself steady. "Well how did Mary get pregnant?"

"Here is what the bible says—Mary is speaking to the angel," I turned back to the story in Luke. "'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God'" (Luke 1:34-35).

Alyssa was thoughtful now. "Isn't the holy spirit God?"

"Yes."

Silence.

Then Alyssa's eyes got big and she giggled with excitement. "So God is Jesus' father?"

You could see the light go on in Alyssa's head. "Jesus is the son of God! That's what they say, Jesus is the son of God. That's because God is Jesus' father!"

I don't know about you, but I think Alyssa understands enough to take communion.

Discussion

1. What do you think Matthew is talking about when he says "Blessed are the Poor in Spirit"?

2. Have you been part of a tradition that encourages developing "Spiritual Poverty"? What did it mean when you've heard it?

3. How are spiritual poverty and material poverty are the same or similar to each other? How are they different from each other?

Commentary from Gutiérrez

The Hebrew *anaw*, plural *anawim* "is the privileged designation of the spiritually poor" (Gutiérrez 169). For Gutiérrez, this is a different thing from material poverty. Spiritual poverty is related to humility; it is the ability to be

open to God guiding ones' life. An example of spiritual poverty is when the prophets describe a remnant group that is faithful to their covenant with God. That is a small group who choose fidelity and care of the poor. (Isaiah 4:3, 6:13 is an example of this). In Zephaniah 3:12-13, God promises to leave a remnant to carry on the faith: "But I will leave in you a people afflicted and poor, the survivors in Israel shall find refuge in the name of the Lord" (Gutiérrez 169). (Checking wording is it in Israel or of Israel?)

But material poverty is not something to strive for, it is not a good thing. It is not a blessing nor a refuge. This remnant is identified as poor; Gutiérrez insists this is spiritual, not material poverty. Poverty here is the opposite of pride and self-sufficiency, synonymous with faith and trust in God. It takes spiritual poverty to be able to face God. The prophet Zephaniah says "Seek the Lord, all in the land who live humbly by his laws, seek righteousness, seek a humble heart" (2:3).

In the New Testament we see that in Matthew's first beatitude--*blessed are the poor in spirit*—it is clear that those who are spiritually poor are who are blessed. This is not about feeling good about material poverty, nor is it proclaiming that God wants some people to be materially poor. Rather, it is humbleness, and a childlike approach to faith that is rewarded with the kingdom of heaven.

Luke's gospel is more complicated. Gutiérrez will not tolerate a lesson from Luke that says "accept your poverty because later this injustice will be compensated for in the Kingdom of God" (Gutiérrez 170). Instead, this is a description of the beginning of God's rule, begun with Jesus' life on earth. God's rule begins the process of eliminating material poverty on earth. When the Kingdom of God is fulfilled, poverty will cease to exist. "[P]overty is an evil and therefore incompatible with the Kingdom of God, which has come in its fullness into history and embraces the totality of human existence" (Gutiérrez 171).

Discussion

4. What is your reaction to Gutiérrez' views on Spiritual Poverty? How do you understand the phrase?

5. What do you think Luke meant by "Blessed are the poor"?

Scriptures

Gutiérrez offers a number of psalms to help explain the concept of Spiritual poverty.

If you have a large group or limited time you may want to divide into three groups to think about these scriptures.

Psalm 25 (bold 3, 4, 5, 10, 12, 14, 21)

1 To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

2 O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me.

3 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame; let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

4 Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.

5 Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

6 Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. 7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O Lord!

8 Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. 9 He leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble his way. **10 All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.**

11 For your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great. **12 Who are they who fear the Lord? He will teach them the way that they should choose.**

13 They will abide in prosperity, and their children shall possess the land. **14 The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes his covenant known to them.** 15 My eyes are ever toward the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net.

16 Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. 17 Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress. 18 Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.

19 Consider how many are my foes and with what violent hatred they hate me. 20 O guard my life and deliver me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. **21 May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you.** 22 Redeem Israel, O God, out of all its troubles.

Discussion

6. What does this Psalm tell us about being close to God?

7. Gutiérrez especially notes the verses in bold. What do they tell you about spiritual poverty?

Selections from Psalm 34

8 Taste and see that the Lord is good
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

9 Fear the Lord, you his holy people,
for those who fear him lack nothing.

10 The lions may grow weak and hungry,
but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.

11 Come, my children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

19. The righteous person may have many troubles,
but the Lord delivers him from them all;

20 he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken.

21 Evil will slay the wicked; the foes of the righteous will be condemned.

22 The Lord will rescue his servants; no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.

Discussion

8. Gutiérrez especially notes these verses. What do they tell you about spiritual poverty?

Selections from Psalm 37

9 For those who are evil will be destroyed,
but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.

16 Better the little that the righteous have
than the wealth of many wicked;

17 for the power of the wicked will be broken,
but the Lord upholds the righteous.

18 The blameless spend their days under the Lord's care,
and their inheritance will endure forever.

19 In times of disaster they will not wither;
in days of famine they will enjoy plenty.

28 For the Lord loves the just
and will not forsake his faithful ones.
29 Wrongdoers will be completely destroyed;
the offspring of the wicked will perish.
40 The Lord helps them and delivers them;
he delivers them from the wicked and saves them,
because they take refuge in him .

Discussion

9. Gutiérrez especially notes these verses. What do they tell you about spiritual poverty?

Aside

Other texts Gutiérrez offers about spiritual poverty

Psalms 9:11, **Psalm 34:11** to know God is to seek God

Psalm 10:14, **34:9**, 37:40 to entrust oneself to God

Psalm 25:3-5, 21, Psalm 37:9 to hope in god

Psalm 25:12, 14 Psalm 34:8, 10 to fear God

Psalm 25:10 to keep God's commandments

Psalm 34:20, 22, Psalm 37:17-18 the poor are just and whole

Psalm 37:28, 149:1 The poor are the faithful

On the other hand, those who fail spiritual poverty are proud and enemies of the helpless Psalm 10:2, 18:28, 37:10, 86:14.

(Bold Texts are ones I have used in the study)

SIX: Relational Ministries

Opening Prayer

God of connection, help us to build relationships with those who are different from us. Guide us to be open to learning from those around us.

Opening Quote

"Concretely, to be poor means to die of hunger, to be illiterate, to be exploited by others, not to know that you are being exploited, not to know that you are a person" (Gutiérrez 164).

A Story

I was frazzled and defensive when Alan appeared in the lunch line that cold, snowy afternoon.

"You know," he said from the lunch line, "you're doing this all wrong" (*Five Loaves* 12).

Oh really? Do you have a better idea? I wondered angrily but silently. Aloud, I laughed and said, "We sure are! Come to our planning meeting next week and sign up to volunteer."

Alan didn't come to the planning meeting. But he continued to show up at lunch, sometimes a little tipsy, sometimes very drunk, always chatting with those around him. Over time, he shared bits about himself—that he was out of work, that he wasn't willing to sleep at a shelter, and that he knew how to organize things. Alan never admitted to being homeless, but others in the community told me he slept at the bus station. He pulled me aside week after week with his evaluation of Worcester Fellowship's ministry.

"This isn't working," Alan said one day. "People are going to steal all this food."

"It's free," I reminded him. "How can they steal it?"

"People are taking you for a ride," he continued. "They can go to the Salvation Army. They are taking advantage of you."

"Well, we're offering another option. And the Salvation Army is not open for lunch on Sundays."

“But not everyone stays for church,” Alan countered.

“You don’t come to worship either, Alan. It’s not required.” After conversations like these, I would move down the serving line to avoid him. I was exasperated with him and mad at myself for being exasperated. I felt I was failing at being pastoral with him. Worcester Fellowship’s ministry was to listen to and affirm people wherever they were in their journey. I balked at his critiques and let my annoyance show.

One day, Alan’s conversation changed. “I think I get it. You are just handing out sandwiches to be nice. You don’t care if people who have enough food take a lunch.” He paused. “But you are really disorganized, you know.” The next week, he showed up early and supervised unloading the lunches from the church van and then rifled through the bags. It was a bitterly cold day, and his dark blue coat was open. He wore neither gloves nor a hat (*Five Loaves* 13).

.....

“What are you doing?” I tried to keep my voice from sounding judgmental.

Alan looked me in the eye and replied, “Picking out two of each kind of sandwich to save for after church. You always have people come after church asking for sandwiches.”

As much as I didn’t want to admit it, Alan was right. Saving some sandwiches was a good idea. The other volunteers made space for his sorting. His friendly chatter made the indoor-church volunteers comfortable. The next week, Alan suggested waiting a little longer before inviting people to get a second sandwich. This ensured that people who were late didn’t have to wait behind people who had already eaten. A few weeks later, Alan situated the volunteers handing out socks farther from the sandwich queue, and the line moved better.

Then, Alan put a volunteer at the head of the line to hand out plastic bags for people to collect their food and socks. He missed a few weeks after that, explaining when he returned that he’d had a “bit of a binge.” Alan never stopped drinking, but he did start hanging around for worship, always off to the side, never part of the circle. When I invited him to participate, he sometimes said he was Jewish. Once, he told me he wasn’t religious while setting up the Communion table. He always reminded me to start the opening prayer, and he brought individuals from the park to me, saying, “She’ll pray with you” as he walked away.

Months later when someone asked me after church if any sandwiches were left, I said, “Ask Alan,” and then I got it. Alan was in charge of lunch.

Alan was better at managing food distribution than anyone else. Volunteers

from the indoor churches got to know him and turned to him for advice about details such as how many tuna, bologna, and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to make. He dealt with fights between the outdoor volunteers, snuck extra servings into the bags of people who were going home to families, and coordinated with the local shelter to distribute leftovers when we had them. He arranged for one of the other Worcester food ministries to bring donations when we ran out. Alan was the brains behind our lunch program (*Five Loaves* 14-15).

Discussion

1. How many poor people do you know? What difference has it made to your life to know people who are poor?

2. Are poor people welcome in your congregation and in your church's ministries to be volunteers and participants—to be givers as well as receivers of ministry?

Commentary

"The first meeting at Worcester Common on Easter Sunday 2007 gathered six people for worship and lunch; by the second year, the church was feeding sixty to one hundred adults each week. Worcester Fellowship, which is affiliated with the United Church of Christ (UCC) and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ, or DOC), operates like an indoor church—that is, a church that has a building. It offers Sunday worship and Bible study, midweek programs, prayer teams, a book discussion group, leadership retreats, and a craft circle. Unlike most churches, Worcester Fellowship has no building. Members worship outdoors, and parishioners, visitors, and volunteers eat lunch together every Sunday. Although the church takes a weekly offering, most of the funding comes from other churches, individual donors, and grants" (*Five Loaves* 10-11).

Worcester Fellowship was five years old when its board sent me to City of God, a conference in Washington, D.C., for members of downtown churches in various cities to come together and wrestle with how to be more involved in the challenges of the cities where they serve. After visiting a variety of outreach ministries in the capital, the workshop leaders asked attendees to reflect on what our home congregations could do to engage more fully with our city. I knew Worcester, and I knew my congregation. But I didn't know the answer. Worcester's primary mission activity was lunch, but I'd never let any members of the congregation help serve the meal. Members of indoor churches in Worcester were recruited to hand out lunch, which the outdoor Worcester Fellowship members ate. The question about outreach led me to an embarrassing realization:

I wasn't letting the members of Worcester Fellowship take part in our ministry" (*Five Loaves* 10-11)

Despite my training in community organizing, my focus on the members of the congregation as the ministers to the community, and my insistence that Worcester Fellowship is a church, not a mission, I wasn't letting my congregants be fully church. I was treating them as less than those of us who led the ministry.

We changed our approach right away, including parishioners in leadership of both the weekly outdoor worship and making space behind the tables for handing out lunch. We adjusted the training of the churches with buildings that brought lunch, so they would understand that they needed to make space for volunteers who didn't have homes. The result was disorganization, chaotic meals, and volunteers who felt like they *belonged* at Worcester Fellowship.

I got a grant to visit other ministries who had people who are poor as the volunteers in the food ministries and discovered the same thing in those ministries. People who are food insecure, alcoholics and addicts, people with felony records, people who could not look others in the eye, people who didn't understand boundaries, people who were not reliable with their schedules, people of all sorts make great volunteers for direct service ministries (*Five Loaves* 15).

"Shared ministry is the term I use when people who are food insecure and people who are food secure share all aspects of ministry. People who want to donate food or money join in the eating, and people who need additional food resources are encouraged to be volunteers in the program. Shared ministry could include planning, carrying out, and evaluating a church-based food ministry, or it might be sharing tasks such as setting up, serving, and cleaning. Regardless of the work, shared ministry requires volunteers get to know one another (*Five Loaves* 15).

Discussion

3. Think about a direct service ministry you take part in. How does it make you feel? What are the benefits of volunteering? Why do you keep taking part?

Scriptures

Acts 6:1-6

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.

2 And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. 3 Therefore, brothers and sisters, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, 4 while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word."

5 What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Commentary

Traditional readings of this text either emphasize the creation of the order of deacons or see the story as about Stephen, setting him up as a church leader in preparation for the next story where he preaches and is then stoned.

Women readers, and congregations facing cultural disputes, want to know what is going in this story. Who are these widows? The language of Hellenists and Hebrews identify women within the community, some from further away, some that are local, who have different traditions. We are encouraged read this as a story where some people are not getting enough food.

However two chapters earlier we learned that the disciples are sharing all that they have equally. "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold" (Acts 4:34). So no one was poor in this community. The phrase "being neglected in the daily distribution of food" in verse 1 could be referring to the Hellenists' frustration that the locals, the Hebrew women, are always the servers. The widows want a turn to be the servers as well.

Belonging. I am recently married to my husband (2012). Early in our dating we went to Montana to meet his family—two sisters and parents. They were thrilled to meet me, and doted on me. They gave me the best seat at the table, offered me the first serving of any foods, went to the restaurants I chose, played the games I wanted to play. This was fun for awhile. But after the fourth or fifth visit, I noticed that I remained a guest at their homes. I could tell I was a guest, not family, because I was not allowed to do any work. I could not wash the dishes, there was nothing I could do to help with dinner. I couldn't even strip the bed as we left.

After a few years Ken's parents needed to move to senior living and the whole family gathered to help them close up their home. And finally, when there was so much work to do, I was invited to help with the work. I had become a member

of the family. Belonging included doing the work that needed to be done.

Discussion

4. What makes you feel like you belong in a group?

John 6:5-13

5 When Jesus looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" 6 He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. 7 Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."

8 One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 9 "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" 10 Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place, so they sat down, about five thousand in all. 11 Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

12 When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." 13 So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets .

Discussion

5. Who seems to have the most resources? Do you think the boy or his family were rich or poor? Why do you think he was willing to share what he had?

6. Usually we see this as a story of Jesus feeding the 5000. He certainly was instrumental to making sure there was enough food. But he doesn't actually serve the food. Who does serve the food? How does it get distributed? Who picks up the excess baskets?

7. What are at the differences between the "givers" and the "receivers" in this story?

Aside

Relational Ministry

In the journey to find solidarity with people who are poor, we need first to develop relationships. And to develop relationships we need to get out of the transactional practices of direct service ministry. In a transactional relationship, the giver has the material resources, and the gives the things away to those who meet the criteria. The criteria are varied--it could be filling out paperwork, following rules about lines and showing good behavior, or perhaps it is just showing up on time. The giver only gives and the receiver only receives.

To be clear, in most churches, we do this transactional relationship very nicely. We do not say demeaning things about the receivers, we engage in caring conversation, we make an effort to get to know the people who come to receive what we have to give. But we still keep our roles as either a giver or a receiver.

In a Relational Ministry, the roles are made more even by sharing the work. Some people come who have plenty, and others come who have little, but both take on the role of giving things away, and both take on the role of receiving things. People who are coming in need of stuff are recognized for the skills they have that makes it possible for them to be volunteers in the program.

Credits

Elizabeth Mae Magill, *Five Loaves, Two Fish, Twelve Volunteers: Growing a Relational Food Ministry*. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2020.

SEVEN: What Can We Do?

Opening Prayer

God of abundance, help us to discern, as individuals and as community, how to make a difference in the poverty around us.

Opening Quote

“Only authentic solidarity with the poor and a real protest against the poverty of our time can provide the concrete, vital context necessary for a theological discussion of poverty” (Gutiérrez 173).

A Story

What I learned in ministry with people who have few material resources, is that a small amount of money can make a huge amount of difference in their lives.

What would you do with \$10,000? It's enough for first, last, and security deposit for an apartment, plus furnishings. For someone with a steady income that is just meets their rent, a one time influx of even \$5000 would be the difference between being homeless and having an apartment.

With \$10,000 a person on a fixed income could decide to move to a part of the country with a lower cost of living. It costs \$10,000 for ten days of inpatient care at McLean Hospital. Was Linda's recovery program thirty days for \$10,000?

While we hear stories of massive medical debts, and 3 million people owe more than \$10k, 28% of those with medical debts owe between \$250 and \$10,000. The average credit card debt in the United states was \$7951 in 2022. Imagine what \$10,000 would do for any of those people.

For those of us that have enough material resources, how hard would it be to give up \$10,000? Perhaps it would take a couple years to save that much to give away. Perhaps it would be simple to give away. But it turns out that \$10,000 can really make a difference.

Commentary from Gutiérrez

“Material poverty is a scandalous condition. Spiritual poverty is an attitude of openness to God and spiritual childhood. Having clarified these two meanings of the term poverty we have cleared the path and can now move forward towards a better understanding of the Christian witness of poverty. We turn now to a third meaning of the term: poverty as a commitment of solidarity and protest” (Gutiérrez 171).

Gutiérrez critiques voluntary material poverty which claims to be a way to get closer to God. Spiritual poverty is what gets us closer to God. It is not detachment from material goods, but rather humbleness and a childlike openness.

Yet he still comes to the conclusion that we Christians should voluntarily choose material poverty. He says it is a way to give up selfishness, and way to love our neighbors. The importance is not the amount of material resources we have, but rather that we do not have more than we need. By choosing to have less, more is available for others. We make this choice in order to be with our neighbors who are poor, and as a way to protest the existence of poverty (Gutiérrez 172). This is taking a risk with our own experience in order to be in solidarity with the poor. And taking a risk to protest against the systems that cause poverty.

If we were to share what we have as described in Acts 2 (4) the goal is not that everyone becomes poor, but rather than everyone has enough. No one is poor (Gutiérrez 173).

Discussion

- 1. What would it look like today to have a community that shares its good equally?**
- 2. What would it look like to give up your material resources until you have just enough?**

Poverty and Charity, Community, and Government.

Discussion.

- 3. What are your ideas for ending poverty? What are some ideas you hear in public conversations about poverty?**

Commentary.

US Poverty can be eliminated. We have the resources. And yet we have not ended poverty.

Part of the reason is because of this question: who is "we? "We" can mean individuals, acting individually. We can mean communities--a gathering of people. That would be families, churches, neighborhoods, clubs. And we can mean governmental organizations--towns, counties, states, regions, our nation.

Another question is what does it mean to "end" poverty. Is it ended if everyone has housing, food, and medical care, or only if people can work and earn what they need for those resources?

Most analysis of poverty requires that we change what we provide for people who are poor. Gutiérrez argues, from the prophets, that poverty is caused by fraudulent commerce, hoarding of resources, and dishonest courts. These imply that it is not people who are poor that need to be fixed, but businesses, people with an excess of resources, and our justice system. Fixing poverty isn't about changing poor people.

Discussion

4. If we base our Christian response to poverty on the Bible, are we required to end fraudulent commerce, hoarding of resources, and dishonest courts? Are these a problem in the US? What do we do about these things?

Commentary

When we look at the challenges of chronic homelessness we find people who are almost all known by either the department of mental health or the justice system. Although we find addictions, we also find a large number of people with other disabilities. And nearly everyone who is chronically homeless has lost their connections to other people—their family, their friends, the neighbors who might help them.

Discussion

5. What can we do to help people rebuild their network of support? Who is best to do that?

Individual Charity

PRO-Charity: While there is much work done on helping congregations to move from Charity to Justice, that is from direct service to changing systems, this idea is not enough, charity is necessary, in addition to systems change. For example, we absolutely need systems change, making it so not as many people do not have adequate food. However, until those systems are changed, people need food. Humans should eat just about every day.

In looking for a Christian take on charity, scripture is clear that individuals should care for one another. Many people ask whether it is okay to give money to people who are asking for it. Proverbs suggests "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord and will be repaid in full" (19:17). This and many other texts are referring to lending money to people who are poor. And in the gospels "Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return" (Luke 6:35a). While we think of charity as giving things to people who are poor, perhaps it is also talking to people who have plenty and reminding of their need to share.

In Leviticus we are instructed to leave the a bit of our earnings (the example given is crops) for the poor to pick up. "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:9-10). This is not implied to be a gift (thus expecting reciprocity, or at least thankfulness) but as an obligation on the part of those who have enough. This could be systematized, for example it could be a government tax that is distributed to the poor. But it also can be an example of how each person with enough could leave some of that they receive to the poor.

ANTI Charity: However, not all charity actually helps people who are poor. When charity is given without asking those in need what they want, it often serves those with enough more than it serves those who are poor. Charity does not change the systems, but can make those with plenty of resources feel good about themselves, such that they don't do more to improve the systems that cause poverty. And some charity actually makes the underlying problems worse.

For example, some grocery stores pay less than a living wage, or limit employment to part-time, thus contributing to the poverty in their community. At the same time, they provide their waste to the local food bank, and get a tax deduction for that. The purpose of the charity is not to improve the the situation for those without enough food—a higher wage would fix that—but rather simply to feel good about the charity, and to get a tax benefit. Our economic system trusts that people who work are able to buy things; charity hides the ways that

system is not working.

Another example is clothing donations. People with enough resources often have an excess of clothing and want the ability to give away slightly worn clothing. They donate that clothing to programs and feel they have done something good for people who are poor. There is some need for clothing, especially professional clothing, for those who are poor. But most of the clothing donated goes to third world countries, and the surplus destroys the local clothing markets. In addition those countries are overwhelmed by the waste created by the unusable clothing they receive. The charity hurts more than it helps.

Discussion

6. How does this inform your sense of a Christian response to poverty?

7. How can we improve charity so that it helps people who are poor?

Community

PRO Community: It is possible that the scriptures telling us to care for the poor are meant to be messages to local churches. The community should be caring for its members. In some denominations or local churches there is a real effort to be sure that everyone involved has enough. Sixty-two percent of the more than 58,000 pantries, and meals in the United States are faith-based (Borger et al). So many of our congregations *are* making a difference in their neighborhoods.

The advantage of this approach is that we can really know the people who are poor. We are caring for people who are “one of us” in many ways. The system can be relational. The local community could then identify what are the blocks to getting ahead for this person or family, and can be part of removing those blocks. Local Habitat for Humanity chapters are an example of this system—the new homeowner is invited into a community where they work on their own home, and then help create a home for the next family. The household support team becomes a community that has the best interests of the Habitat family as their goal.

Something that few churches are doing now, but one they could take on, is creating paycheck lending programs that do not charge interest. This is one of the systemic issues exacerbating poverty today—if a person needs just a little to tide them over the interest rates businesses charge is sinful. Churches could raise

funds for the administrative fees and lend money to people in their local community. A financial professional in the congregation could help them get started on this.

ANTI Community: Some interpret the care we are to give to people who are poor to mean we should care for *our* poor. So we as a community, church, or neighborhood, should make sure everyone in our community, church, or neighborhood, has enough. While I was raised to believe this was insular and unChristian, in most churches I have served we do not *expand* this idea to mean "all of our poor, and others too" but rather reduce it, thus not meeting the needs even of those within our walls.

One argument against the idea that Christians are called as a community to solve poverty is simply the fact that we have failed to do this. For the most part we simply have not taken on asking those who have plenty to give, nor making sure that those without enough are cared for.

Also, poor communities tend to be poorer than rich communities so they don't have anyone to do the helping. Or major helping.

Discussion

8. How does this inform your sense of a Christian response to poverty?

9. How can we improve our community work to help people who are poor?

Government

PRO Government: To start with, the words of the Prophets and Matthew 25 are about the nation caring for people who are poor. There is no argument to be made from the Hebrew Bible that the care of the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the alien is an individual or even a community issue. The nation is found guilty of not caring for the poor. There are many examples of concern that the rich are not doing what is right, hoarding, especially, but the punishment from God is on the nation. The prophets are calling on the leadership of the nation to make rules and enforce behaviors that result in care of those who are poor. If we want to do what our scriptures say, then we should be taking advantage of our democratic authority by voting for those that will provide for the least of these, and then push the leaders to live up to their promises to do this.

Having the government be in charge of the redistribution of wealth from those who have more than enough, to those who have not enough happens most easily at a national level. Large communities where most people are wealthy can

contribute to the well-being of communities where most people are poor, without needing to be geographically nearby.

Tax laws can be used to care for the poor—the earned income credit does a great deal to care for working poor people who have children right now. Research has shown that direct grants are the most effective tool for fighting poverty, and the Earned Income credit directly puts more money in people’s pockets. Additional government programs like this could go a long way to dealing with U.S. poverty.

It is also easier to work together as a nation when everyone who has enough money contributes money to solving poverty. Rather than expecting people who are rich to voluntarily give money to their local community, or to individuals who are poor, the government calculates a reasonable percentage and takes it from everyone who has enough. Since we know that most very rich people have little contact with people who are poor, using a government system provides more help, with less effort, than programs that require us to introduce each poor person and each person with plenty to each other.

Also, the government has the authority to reduce the ways that employers, banks, and others take advantage of those with few resources. Both local governments and the federal government can enforce changes that neither individuals nor churches can affect, outside of efforts at moral persuasion.

In the New Testament, the argument for whether the government should be part of our response to poverty is not as clear. The judgement of the sheep and goats is a judgment of “the nations.” Jesus, looking at a coin with a picture of the Roman leader, suggests that paying taxes to Rome is okay. Beyond that, Jesus and the gospel writers say little about how to eradicate poverty.

The writers of the gospels are concerned with the behaviors of the “powers that be” which maintain the status quo—and thus maintain a society where some have plenty and others have none. They would interpret the New Testament as anti-Empire. But what does this tell those of us in the US to do? The US Government is not Rome.

Jesus doesn't give any advice on political organizing, and neither do the prophets, because both Rome (for the Jews) and the Kingdom of Judah were not democracies. The prophets' only tools to change the government was tirades. For the Jews at the time Jesus, the way to change the government was revolution. Today, in our democracy, we have the vote. And because our politicians are dependent on our vote, we can write to, talk with, and protest our elected officials.

In the United States, our government is *us*. We are responsible for expressing

our views of what our government should do, and for voting for the leaders we want in our government. As such, we are responsible for how well our government cares for the least of these our siblings.

ANTI Government The challenge is that the force that can do the most redistribution of resources—the federal government—is far from the problem of individual poverty. And the farther a body is from the problem, the less realistic the solutions it proposes. In addition, the logical solutions vary based on geography and demographics. A jobs program designed for a city is unlikely to help with rural poverty. In the middle of our country, access to health care is caused by different things than it is on the coasts. Housing costs, and availability, are dramatically different based on geography—\$1425 a month can get a three bedroom apartment in South Dakota, and is not enough for a single room rental in Boston. We can solve this by having each state provide their own program, or each county or town, but the costs of managing a program go up as we diversify the output.

In addition, we are asking *what is the Christian response to poverty*. We aren't asking all people to be Christian, so why would we ask all people to contribute to care for the poor? If money is not given freely, but rather is taken by the government, am I really living up to my Christian responsibility? Is it right or fair to *require* that people give to those who are poor?

Another argument against use of government funding is simply the inefficiency of government programs. Without the pressures of private sector competition, government spending can become bloated, funds can be spent on inappropriate programs, money is wasted. Do we want to risk spending money poorly? Perhaps it is better to build relationships with individuals and help them, or to work as a local organization helping those who are poor.

Discussion

10. How does this inform your sense of a Christian response to poverty?

Scriptures

Deuteronomy 15:1-15

“Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. 2 And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it, because the Lord’s remission has been proclaimed. 3 Of a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you. 4 There will, however, be no one in need

among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, 5 if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. 6 When the Lord your God has blessed you, as he promised you, you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

7 “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. 8 You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. 9 Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. 10 Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. 11 Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’

12 “If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you six years, in the seventh year you shall set that person free. 13 And when you send a male slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. 14 Provide for him liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your winepress, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you. 15 Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today.

Discussion

12. There is little evidence this was ever practiced. Why do you think the editors of the texts kept this in our scriptures?

13. What do you think it says to us today?

14. How might we live this out in a way that would work in our present economy?

Aside

Gutiérrez offers a number of scriptures that point to strategies for ending poverty. They cover the idea of leaving the remains of our harvests for the poor and the alien. It would be interesting to figure out how to do this today with our various non-farm forms of income. Another Hebrew Bible proposal is a triennial tithe, given to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, rather than to the government structure. The year of Jubilee is another idea for freeing slaves and caring for those with debts. There is little evidence that the triennial tithe or jubilee were carried out.

The practice of no-interest loans does seem to have been a part of the Hebrew tradition and today Habitat for Humanity uses it as one of their strategies for making housing ownership possible. I have a fantasy of churches creating no-interest loan systems for people who use the payday loan system in the United States. This predatory system charges large interest rates for short-term loans meant to carry a person until the next payday. Only people who are very poor need such a loan system.

Don't collect everything after the harvest, leave the remains for the poor and the alien.

Deut 24:19-21 “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. **20** When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. **21** “When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.

Lev 19:9-10 “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. **10** You shall not strip your vineyard bare or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.

Lev 23:22 “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God.”

Discussion: Although the model is for farming, it is about people who have plenty leaving their extra for people who are poor. How might we do this today?

The triennial tithe is not given to the temple, but to the alien, the orphan, the widow.

Deut 14:28-29 “Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your

produce for that year and store it within your towns; **29** the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.

Deut 26:12 “When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year (which is the year of the tithe), giving it to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns.

Discussion: Is this a tax or charity? Theoretically the poor are regularly eating from the remains left in the field, so it seems the third year is offering an extra bounty. Is this a good idea?

No interest Loans

Exod 22:25 25 “If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them.

Lev 25:35-37 35 “If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you,[a] you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens. **36** Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. **37** You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance or provide them food at a profit.

Deut 23:20 20 On loans to a foreigner you may charge interest, but on loans to another Israelite[a] you may not charge interest, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings in the land that you are about to enter and possess.

Well that last one is a bummer, eh? But this absolutely brings up the possibility of churches offering pay day loans. We need to fill the banking gap.

The year of Jubilee

Exod 23:11 [T]he seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow so that the poor of your people may eat, and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard and with your olive orchard.

Lev 25:2-7 “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a Sabbath for the Lord. **3** Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in their yield, **4** but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for the land, a Sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. **5** You shall not reap the after growth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. **6** You may eat what the land yields during its Sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you, **7** for your

livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food.

The Land belongs to God.

Leviticus 25:23-24

23 The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. **24** Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.

There is no evidence that this was lived out, but what a visionary concept? What would it mean to imagine doing this in our lives, in our works, in our community? Paying off medical debt. Other things?

Credits

"Approximately 6% of adults (16 million people) in the U.S. owe more than \$1,000, 2% (6 million people) owe more than \$5,000 in medical debt, and 1% of adults (3 million people) in the U.S. owe more than \$10,000 in medical debt.
[https://www.healthsystemtracker.org/brief/the-burden-of-medical-debt-in-the-united-states/#:~:text=Most%20of%20the%202023%20million,%25\)%20owe%20more%20than%20%2410%2C000.](https://www.healthsystemtracker.org/brief/the-burden-of-medical-debt-in-the-united-states/#:~:text=Most%20of%20the%202023%20million,%25)%20owe%20more%20than%20%2410%2C000.)

"Average credit card debt in America is \$7,951, based on 2022 data from the Federal Reserve and the U.S. Census Bureau."
<https://www.usatoday.com/money/blueprint/credit-cards/what-is-the-average-credit-card-debt/>

<https://www.rd.com/article/what-happens-used-clothing-donations/>

<https://www.gq.com/story/oliver-franklin-wallis-wasteland-excerpt>

Christine Borger, Amaris Kinne, Meghan O'Leary, Sheila Zedlewski, Emily Engelhard, Jill Montaquila, Elaine Waxman, Theresa DelVecchio Dys, Gregory Mills, David Watsula, Monica Hake, Brittany Morgan, Nancy Weinfeld. *Hunger in America 2014: Executive Summary* (Feeding America. August 2014) 3, accessed February 28, 2019.

<http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/hunger-in-america/hia-2014-executive-summary.pdf>.

Good Friday

"Christian poverty has meaning only as a commitment of solidarity with the poor, with those who suffer misery and injustice" (Gutiérrez 172).

Stations of the Cross Community Worship

To prepare for this Good Friday ritual, you will need to pay attention throughout the year of events that have happened in your community that hurt people who live in material poverty. Keep news stories, and check out sites of fires, deaths, and violence in your community. If you can't find enough stations for this ritual consider places like your police station, social security offices, subsidized or substandard housing locations.

Create a map of the events that have happened in the last year and develop a walking or driving route to selected locations. Edit the words at each stop, but use this outline.

At each location we will gather, pray, remember, share, and then bless the site.

GATHER Let us gather together in the memory of those whose lives were disrupted by the fire here on [date].

PRAYER Let us Pray: Holy God we are weeping with those who have lost so much. Be with our community as we struggle. Amen.

REMEMBER We remember this fire that started in the middle of the night. *silence.*

We remember the firefighters who came here to help us. *silence.*

We remember the families that lost their housing this night. *Silence.*

We remember the people who lost their lives that night: List names with silence in the spaces. *Silence.*

SHARE We ask you to lift up your memories of that night. *People may share stories. Once everyone who chooses to has shared the leader lifts their hands in blessing.*

BLESSING

God of healing, bless this space that the memory of what happened here might be a call to action to care for all survivors of fires in our community.

Move to next site.

At the last session, you may want to add these words

CLOSING We have seen and felt and prayed with those who are suffering. Let us share the prayer that Jesus has taught us.

Lord's Prayer in the language of your community.

A HYMN

BENEDICTION

Thank you for reading.

This draft is free and can be shared with others. If you choose to use this in your congregation, I ask that you pay for the resource on a sliding scale based on the number of participants in the study.

For street churches and other churches mostly reaching people living in poverty, \$0 to \$3 per person.

For small churches with little or no endowment, \$3 to \$5 per person.

For churches with enough resources, \$5 to \$7 per person.

For churches with an endowment or ample resources \$7 to \$10 per person.

I can receive payment by paypal at pastorlizM@gmail.com. If you would like to mail a check, send me an email and I will provide my mailing address. Email me at pastorlizM@gmail.com with critiques, input, and advice as I continue to edit the study.

Elizabeth Mae Magill
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