

Sermon: Epiphany 6

The Rev. Mike Wernick

February 17, 2019

Year C

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Psalm 1

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Luke 6:17-26

In 1994... Episcopal priest and author... Barbara Crafton... spoke at a diocesan workshop I attended in southern Ohio... she was talking about the poor and homeless... and the church's response to them... and during a break... in my theological naiveté... I said... *There... but for the grace of God... go I...* and she paused... and gave me kind of a stern look... and asked... *So you don't think... that the poor... have God's grace... huh?...* Yikes! Yes. Of course they do... we all have God's grace...

But do the rich deserve to be rich because they've worked hard... and maybe have worked the system... maybe had some insider information about particular investments... do we act as though all people are worthy of God's grace... or do we separate that worthiness... that intrinsic self-worth... the dignity of every human being... from our sense of who deserves what... do our corporate actions... and the laws we pass... affirm this belief... do we understand budgets to be moral documents... and put our money where our mouths are... or do we think... *God's Work... Our Hands... but... My Money...* and in spite of knowing better... do we still wonder... like Job's friends... and Jesus' disciples... *who sinned... this man... or his parents... that he was born blind...*

A deacon I know once said... some people make bad choices... some people make uninformed choices... and some people make great choices... but the systems in which they live... work against them... it may be true that we reap what we sow... there may well be consequences for the choices we make and the things we do... or don't do... but the deck... as they say... is stacked against some people... and in favor of others...

the systems in which we swim don't treat everyone equally... we don't live on a level playing field...

In today's Gospel... Jesus blesses those who are poor... hungry... weeping... hated... excluded... reviled... and defamed... but this is the Sermon on the Plain... and it's not quite the same as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel... The Sermon on the Plain... on a level place... appears in our Sunday readings... only when Easter falls after the first week of April... and then only during the years when the lectionary turns to Luke's Gospel... so we haven't heard this Gospel reading since 2007... the Sermon on the Mount includes nine blessings to Luke's four... but only in Luke... does Jesus pronounce woe to those who are rich... full... laughing... and spoken well of...

The Rev. Martin Smith writes... in Luke... the poor... whom Jesus congratulates... are the exploited and the indigent... Matthew... however... for reasons I don't know... has massaged poverty into a spiritual category... *Blessed are the poor in spirit*... this made it impossible for him to present the other side of Jesus' pronouncement... in which... according to Luke... he declares... *Woe to you who are rich*... Matthew could hardly spiritualize the idea of woe that comes from being rich in spirit... it just wouldn't work... so Matthew dropped the woes... and we are in debt to Luke for faithfully presenting the other side of Jesus' beatitudes...

In Matthew 26... Jesus is at Bethany... at the house of Simon the leper... and a woman came... with an alabaster jar of expensive ointment... and poured it on his head... as he sat at table... the disciples were angered at this... and said... *Why this waste? We could have sold this ointment... and made a lot of money... and given it to the poor...* and Jesus said... *don't trouble her... she has performed a good service for me... for you always have the poor with you... but you will not always have me...*

You always have the poor with you... the incarnate God is saying that you'll always have the poor with you... it's a fact of life... it's how things are supposed to be... right... so get over it... but no... this is NOT what Jesus is saying...

According to Forbes magazine... the combined wealth of the richest 400 Americans... exceeds... the combined wealth of 63% of America's households... while 20% of those people have no net worth... or a negative net worth...

Deuteronomy is the Jewish Testament's book... that's cited most often in the Christian Testament... it's the bridge that connects covenantal law... shalom justice... alternative power systems... and economic rights... from the Torah through to the Christian Testament... and Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes... Deuteronomy has a peculiar and persistent propensity... for the poor and marginal... and continually urges generosity and attentiveness towards widows... orphans... and sojourners... those who are legally... and economically disinherited...

Presbyterian minister Liz Theoharis writes... The Deuteronomic Code speaks of mandated sabbatical and Jubilee years... prohibitions on charging interest to Israelites... protection of pledges given as collateral for loans... just weights and measures... prompt payment of wages... before there were government shutdowns... equity in legal proceedings... and direct provisions for the poor through tithing and gleaning... some of the individual regulations include the elimination of state tribute, setting a year for the remission of debts... freeing slaves... allowing the poor and weak to go on pilgrimage... forbidding interest and pledges taken from the weak... and mandating that harvest leftovers remain in the fields for the hungry... these instructions are given with reminders to the people... that God led them out of slavery in Egypt... and with the highest commandment... the Shema... the people bound themselves with all of this... in a covenant... and keeping that covenant was viewed as a matter of life and death...

But Deuteronomy 15 also says... that because people will not follow those commandments... there will always be poor among you... so when Jesus says that you'll always have the poor among you... he isn't condoning poverty... he's reminding us of Deuteronomy's message... that God hates poverty... and has commanded us to end poverty by forgiving debts... by outlawing slavery... and get a load of this... by restructuring society around the needs of the poor... Jesus' words then... are a critique of empire and inequality... and rather than saying that poverty is unavoidably pre-determined by God... he says that poverty is created by human beings... by their disobedience to God... and their neglect of their neighbor...

John Shea writes... Jesus is aware of the discrepancy between God's vision for human life... and how we are actually living... and it's out of this disconnect... that the blessings and the woes come... because the way the world judges success and failure... or happiness and despair... is neither normative nor lasting... not normative... because they don't coincide with God's intentions for us... and they're not lasting... because any social context which isn't built on the rock of spiritual truth... will crumble...

1 Timothy 6:17-19 put it into perspective then... and puts it into perspective now... *As for those who in the present age are rich... command them not to be haughty... or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches... but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good... to be rich in good works, generous... and ready to share... thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation [for the future]... so that they may take hold of the life... that really is life...* and this is the life... to which we as well... are called...

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