



Trinity United Methodist Church Newsletter



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Who Are the Poor? Part Two

[Based upon a Presentation by Dr. Douglas Meeks, Professor of Wesleyan Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School]

*²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said:
“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God. Luke 6:20 NRSV*

*³¹ Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker,
but those who are kind to the needy honor him. Pr 14:31 NRSV*

In the first part of this series I laid out the five dimensions of poverty described in scripture. Poverty as used in this article means being shut out of society, or marginalized, due to the lack of some resource held in abundance, or controlled, by others. The five dimensions of poverty are Economic Poverty, Poverty of Health, Political Poverty, Cultural Poverty and Spiritual Poverty. Each of the five types of poverty can be readily identified in our society and scripture challenges us to act to prevent oppression of these people.

The easiest form of poverty for us to recognize is **Economic Poverty**; those who lack sufficient economic resources to care for themselves and their families. It is easy to see those around us who fall into that category if we will look. The problem is, often we choose not to look. Many passages of scripture challenge us to address the immediate needs of those living in poverty. Two of the strongest are those cited in last week's article. In Isaiah 58:7 Isaiah, speaking for God, declares that the worship that God desires is feeding the hungry, caring for the homeless and clothing the naked. It is likely this passage that Jesus had in mind when he described the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25:31-46:

³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that 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.’

‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

What you did for (or to) the least of these you did for (or to) Christ. Scripture repeatedly calls on those who have been blessed with economic wealth to help those who are economically poor.

Some insist that it is better to “teach someone to fish” than to give them fish. This is probably true as far as it goes. But take note in our society that programs to teach people “to fish” are being cut, and even when offered are often not accompanied by assistance to obtain food, shelter, childcare and other necessities while being “taught to fish.” A program that can’t be accessed by those it’s designed for might as well not exist. As a closing note to Economic Poverty, consider the observation of the writer of James:

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. James 2:14-17

Poverty of Health is also a problem in our nation. If you do not have your health you may not be able to work and earn a decent living. I recall a woman in her mid-thirties who came to West Nashville UMC for our community meals. She had worked for the State as an accountant until she suffered injuries in an automobile accident with an uninsured driver. She suffered some brain damage and could no longer work as an accountant. She lost her health insurance, her home and her family.

When describing how the People of Israel failed to be a people of God the prophet Ezekiel identified their failure to look after the poor and injured:

Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. Ezekiel 34:2-4 NRSV

In contrast, scripture notes that Jesus was moved by compassion when he saw the sick. Matthew 14:14. Suffering Poverty of Health is really little different than economic poverty. In fact, in this nation, overwhelming medical bills are the direct or contributing cause of 62% of all bankruptcies according to a 2009 study. Scripture calls upon us to care about, and address, this issue. However we choose to address the problems of health care in this country we cannot, as faithful Christians, pretend the problem does not exist.

Political Poverty may be, but is not always closely associated with economic poverty. It exists where a particular group has very little political power and can be oppressed by those with that power. The Prophet Amos condemned the oppression of the poor and identified it as a major failing of the people of Israel. Amos 2:6-7. Amos 5:12.

Political power is often obtained through the use of wealth, and lack of wealth leaves groups vulnerable to those able to purchase political support. The most prominent example of political poverty in our history is the treatment of African Americans. For one hundred years after the Civil War they lacked any meaningful voice in this nation’s politics despite their numbers, economic, educational and cultural contributions and service to their country in time of war. . Among the groups experiencing political poverty in this nation today are active duty military who are paid wages that leave them impoverished and veterans who cannot obtain the benefits to which they are entitled. For instance, since members of our military are underpaid they are often

victimized by unscrupulous lenders. However, those lenders also have considerable lobbying power in Congress and the State legislatures. Such lenders are found in large numbers around all military bases and little is done by the government to stop them from preying upon underpaid military families. Nothing is done by Congress to address the underlying problem of their poor wages.

Veterans of wars from Viet Nam, Korea, The Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan are waiting months or more than a year to obtain the benefits promised to them and the situation has only gotten worse as the number of injured veterans has grown. While military vendors with powerful lobbies and political support have gotten rich on these wars we have virtually abandoned the veterans who have sacrificed their health and well-being for our benefit. The military vendors have the political capital to spend, the veterans do not.

Those who are unemployed and dependent upon assistance from the government for subsistence are also among the politically impoverished. This was demonstrated in the financial meltdown of the mortgage industry a few years ago. Billions were devoted to bailing out the banks “too big to fail” while many individuals were ignored as their homes were taken away. Individuals, as opposed to the financial institutions, did not have the political clout to obtain meaningful assistance. They were politically impoverished.

One last group experiencing political poverty is undocumented aliens. This last group is particularly interesting. For decades, indeed a majority of the twentieth century, the nation relied upon the work of undocumented aliens. They became an integral part of the economy that everyone knew about but that the authorities largely ignored. These people often worked for less than minimum wages, paid taxes and social security but benefited from neither. Politically they have no voice at all.

Political poverty inevitably leads to oppression which Amos proclaims is contrary to God’s laws. The Apostle Paul was even more blunt. He declared rulers and authorities (governments) potential adversaries to God’s reign:

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Ephesians 6:10-12 NRSV

Is all government to be equated with evil? Of course not. But Paul does not allow us to pass the burden of correcting oppression and inequity to the government. Paul reminds us that it is not sufficient to simply note that some group has oppressed another lawfully or that another’s benefits were denied after a “fair hearing.” At the core of the Gospel is the Greatest Commandment: Love God and love one another. Matthew 22:34-40. If we ignore a group’s political poverty, and the oppression and inequity that follows, we fail to demonstrate God’s love for the members of that group.

Closely related to the concept of Political Poverty is **Cultural Poverty**. Cultural Poverty exists where a people are discouraged from experiencing their cultural heritage or prevented from expressing their cultural identity. The classic example in the Old Testament is found in the Book of Daniel. The exiles in Babylon are prohibited from following the Torah and punished when they protest.

Current examples of Cultural Poverty exist within the immigrant communities in this nation, most especially among the Hispanics and Muslims. That may seem an unusual assertion with regard to Hispanics given the abundance of Mexican and South American restaurants, groceries and entertainment in our midst but I believe it is accurate. Much of the anti-immigrant animosity seems to me to be directed toward Hispanics,

probably because of the large number of undocumented Hispanic immigrants. It is difficult to celebrate your cultural identity if you are surrounded by people who hate you for that identity.

Animosity toward Muslims is also not difficult to understand after 9/11. But we have carried that animosity to extremes as we have attempted to stop Muslim worship and even attempted to legislate against Islam. Yet Muslims have been a part of our history from the beginning. A significant percentage of African slaves brought to the country in the 18th and 19th centuries were Muslim. The first Mosques were built around one hundred years ago. Until 9/11 Muslims were largely free to practice their faith among us. Now they are likely to be the target of hate attacks.

In looking for the scriptural response to the issue of Cultural Poverty we begin with the Torah. Thus in Deuteronomy 10:17-20 we find the following:

¹⁷ For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸ who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. ¹⁹ You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

See also, Job 31:32; Ps 94:6; Ps 146:9; Matthew 25:35. God commanded the people to remember that they were once strangers and should therefore show hospitality to strangers. Jesus said the same. Matthew 25:35. Indeed, the parable of the Good Samaritan is essentially the story of a stranger showing hospitality and brotherly concern to another stranger.

The “other,” the one not like us, is often distrusted and indeed from time to time is a threat. But we too often class whole peoples as “others” and seek to isolate them, placing a price upon maintaining their cultural identity. However, as the Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 12, God created us in all our diversity and we need that diversity. Must we find a solution to the problems of immigration? Of course. Do we need to protect ourselves from Islamic and other Terrorists? Again, of course. But, we are also Christians and called to live as the Body of Christ, welcoming the stranger. Indeed, many of those we seek to isolate as “other” are, in fact, our brothers in sisters in Christ; fellow Christians. This is especially true of many Hispanic immigrants as well as immigrants from Middle Eastern Countries. Do we value our national identity more than our Christian identity?

Finally, there is **Spiritual Poverty**. Spiritual Poverty can be thought of as **not knowing** that you need God. Spiritual Poverty occurs whenever we place something other than God at the center of our lives. In the article last week I gave a number of examples from scripture of Spiritual Poverty.

Our response to Spiritual Poverty is dictated by Matthew 28:19:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Our call as the Church is to offer the Gospel, to offer Christ, to the World. Addressing Spiritual Poverty will include addressing the problems of Economic Poverty, Poverty of Health, Political Poverty and Cultural Poverty wherever we find them. Addressing Spiritual Poverty means living as the Body of Christ and offering the Salvation of Christ to the world.

The Bible as the Tennessee State Book

I have been the pastor of Trinity UMC for five years. By now you should know that I do everything possible to insure that my ministry is centered in scripture. All of my sermons are closely tied to scripture and, I believe, those who have participated in bible studies with me know how much I love the bible. Even when we struggle together on the meaning of scripture it is with the understanding that our faith beliefs are derived, in large part, from scripture. An article of faith of the United Methodist Church is that scripture contains all that is necessary for salvation and that we cannot impose a condition for salvation that is not based in scripture.

Despite my love of the Bible, I am disturbed that there is a bill in the State Legislature to make the Bible the “State Book.” There are number of official State objects. For instance, the “State Flower” is the Iris. The “State Bird” is the Mockingbird. There are two current and one prior species of “State Fish.” The smallmouth bass is the official “State Game Fish”, (having replaced the largemouth bass as the official “State Sport Fish” in 2005) and the channel catfish is the official “State Commercial Fish.” Speaking before the Tennessee Legislature on Tuesday, April 7th, Rev. Michael Williams of West End United Methodist Church had this to say:

"I love catfish, but listen, it doesn't come close to the Holy Scripture..."

Rev. Williams went on to explain that placing the Bible next to the other State objects does not so much honor scripture as demean scripture.

There are a number of problems with this legislation. First, it is hard to see how adopting the scriptures of one religion as the “Official State Book” is not an establishment of religion in violation of the Tennessee and United States Constitutions. Second, which version of the Christian bible is to be adopted (assuming that the Legislature does not intend to simply include the Jewish Canon)? The Catholic Bible contains books not included in the Protestant Bible. Many Tennessee Christians would not accept any translation other than the King James Version. The Bible is translated into hundreds of languages with ambiguities of translation resulting. The English translations are themselves translations of texts based upon three other languages (Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic). Third, while the bible is central to our faith, it is not what we worship. The bible can, if we let it, become an idol that we worship in place of God. Making the bible the official “State Book” seems to raise it to the status of something to be worshipped. Finally, any Christian legislator voting for this legislation should reflect on Matthew 6:1 *Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.* Is the legislator voting for this bill parading his or her faith in public as the “politic” thing to do? Only God knows.

The State is facing real issues and problems, not the least of which is the lack of healthcare for thousands. Perhaps the legislature can find something more pressing upon which to focus its time and energy.

Holy Week Services

What a great week we had! Not only the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services but the Easter Egg Hunt on Saturday morning. The Easter Sunday celebration was especially joyful. It was a special blessing that Nannette was able to join us for Easter Sunday. Thanks to all who helped make this Easter Celebration so special.

Easter Season Sermon Series What's the Least I Can Believe and Still be Christian?

Several years ago Dr. Martin Thielen, a United Methodist Pastor here in the Tennessee Conference, wrote a book titled, "What is the Least I Can Believe and Still be a Christian?" The title is not really descriptive of the thrust of the book but comes from a question Dr. Thielen was asked by a parishioner contemplating a profession of faith. Dr. Thielen uses the question as a jumping off point to discuss things that are not central to Christian belief and things that he believes are central to Christian belief.

Beginning April 12, the Sunday after Easter, I will begin a ten part sermon series loosely based on Dr. Thielen's book. The first five sermons will focus on propositions that you do not have to believe to be a Christian. The second five will focus on propositions that I believe are central to Christian Faith. The titles for these sermons are listed below:

- *You do not have to Believe that God Brings Catastrophes into Our Lives.*
- *You do not have to Believe that Women Cannot be Preachers or Leaders of the Church.*
- *You do not have to Believe that Christians Never Doubt.*
- *You do not have to Believe that "Bad" People Will be 'Left Behind' by God.*
- *You do not have to Believe that Everything in the Bible Should be Taken Literally.*

- *To be Christian, You Must Believe in Christ.*
- *To be Christian, You Must Believe in the Church, the Body of Christ.*
- *To Be Christian, You Must Believe in the Holy Spirit.*
- *To be Christian, You Must Believe in God's Love for the World.*
- *To be Christian, You Must Believe in the Resurrection.*

One reason I offer sermon series is to provide an opportunity for you to be able to invite people to our Church. It is sometimes easier to invite people to come and visit the Church when you can tell them what the sermon will be about. A sermon series offers people an opportunity to get to know us over a series of weeks and experience what it is like to participate in our ministries. I encourage you to take this opportunity to invite others to "Come and See" what Trinity United Methodist Church is like.

72+U The Mission and Ministry of the Tennessee Conference and Trinity UMC

After this the Lord appointed [seventy-two] others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ² He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Luke 10:1-2

The mission of the Memphis and Tennessee Conferences of the United Methodist Church is to Discover, Equip, Connect and Send lay and clergy leaders who shape congregations that offer Jesus Christ to a hurting world, one neighborhood at a time. The values underlying this mission are:

Unrelenting love for all people
Integrity
Excellence
Faithfulness and Fruitfulness
Innovation

Luke 10:1-2 describes the beginning of the first missionary effort of the Disciples of Jesus Christ. Some translations state that Jesus sent forth 70 disciples, others say that he sent forth 72. The Tennessee and Memphis Conferences, under the leadership of Bishop William McAlilly have adopted that scripture as a map for our own mission in our communities. The Bishop has invited us to view our communities as our mission fields, seeking to bring the Gospel to everyone in our communities.

In the coming months I will bring you more information about this mission initiative and how we might be a part of it.

The Poverty and Justice Bible

The Poverty & Justice Bible is a bible that highlights each passage of scripture that deals with the issues of poverty and justice. There are more than 2000 references in scripture to poverty and justice, as opposed to four or five on such controversial subjects as homosexual acts or marriage. Yet many Christians seem to think that helping the poor is a pointless and even harmful act. As an on-going part of this newsletter, I will be providing citations to passages from the Old and New Testaments each week that deal with what scripture tells us about poverty and justice. If you are interested in learning more about *The Poverty & Justice Bible* you can check on Amazon.com or go to www.Justicebible.org.

*¹³We have rebelled and refused
to follow you.
Our hearts were deceitful,
and so we lied;
we planned to abuse others
and turn our backs on you.*

*¹⁴Injustice is everywhere;
justice seems far away.
Truth is chased out of court;
honesty is shoved aside.
¹⁵Everyone tells lies;
those who turn from crime
end up ruined. Isaiah 59:13-15 CEV*

Scripture really couldn't get much clearer. When we lie we turn our backs on God. When we abuse others we turn our backs on God. When we deny justice or allow injustice to continue without protest we deny God.

⁶For he will repay according to each one's deeds: ⁷to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹For God shows no partiality. Romans 2:6-11 NRSV

Some Christians seem to believe that being Christian means that we will never have to account for our sins. However, scripture is very clear that there will be judgment for everyone. The forgiveness of those sins comes through Christ but that does not mean that we will never have to come face to face with what we have done to others and explain ourselves to God.

Prayer Ministry

The following persons have agreed to be part of the prayer ministry at Trinity UMC:

Elva Beard	Sarah Jordan	Kenneth Stevens	Judy Richardson
Larry Eastwood	Mac McAfee	Patricia Stevens	Charles Wilson
Leslie Eastwood	Rachel Newman	Sam Richardson	

The members of the prayer ministry of Trinity United Methodist church covenant with one another to pray daily for:

- Those concerns on the prayer list of the Church and for healing of body and spirit for all persons listed;
- For each ministry of the church that each ministry would work to bring the Gospel to those within our community and most especially to bring the Gospel to those who have not yet accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior;
- For all the members of the Trinity UMC community that they be led and enabled to live as the Body of Christ;
- For our local community and all its needs, especially for those who are struggling with the burden of poverty;

- For our nation and our world that God help lead the people of the world to live in peace with God's Kingdom.

If you would like to be a part of this ministry (or if you have already spoken to me about it and were inadvertently left off the list) please let me know and I will see that you are added.

Up-Coming Sermons

April 12: "**What Do I Have to Believe?**" **You Don't Have To Believe that God Brings Catastrophes.** I am always distressed when people say things that indicate that God must have a purpose for a tragedy in another's life when the context of the statement suggests that God has caused that tragedy. I believe that God works constantly with everything that happens to bring healing to all that happens, but I do not believe that God causes storms to hurt or kill someone or for a madman to go on a rampage in order to make a point. More importantly, you do not have to hold the belief that God brings catastrophes into our lives in order to be a Christian. My texts are Psalm 22 and Luke 13:1-5.

April 19: "**What Do I Have to Believe?**" **You do not have to Believe that Women Cannot be Preachers or Leaders of the Church.** One of the greatest on-going sins of the Church is its rejection of women as pastors and leaders. Even in the United Methodist Church where women have been ordained for over fifty years there are many who oppose women pastors. This Sunday we will apply the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to analyze the scriptures on women in ministry. My texts are 1 Timothy 2:1-15 and Rom 16:1-16.

Worship Leader's Schedule

April 12

Rachel Newman, **Liturgist**

Donnie & Renita Hartsock, **Greeters**

Rodger & Cherry Klein, **Ushers**

April 19

Rodger Klein, **Liturgist**

Tommy & Jo Cotton, **Greeters**

Donnie & Renita Hartsock, **Ushers**

Announcements

Everyone is encouraged to be at church this **Sunday, April 12**. A photographer will be present to take a photograph of the congregation in front of the church. This photo is being done to commemorate the sesquicentennial celebration this year. Please plan to be present that day and for a brief time after church.

Our **directory** has been updated and draft copies will be available **Sunday** for your review. We want all of the information to be correct so please review your information in the directory for accuracy. Feel free to make changes on the draft.

Quilt project: All of the outstanding quilt squares that have been sewed will need to be returned by **Sunday, April 12**. Please see that Judy Richardson receives these. There are more squares that need to be painted. The ones that have been done are beautiful. Currently, we have ten completed and we need 25. Please see Dana or Judy if you would be able to paint.

April Birthdays

Betty Whitefield, Mary Coleman, Jo Oliphant, Jason Aldred, Houston Hartsock

Happy Birthday to each of you!