



Trinity United Methodist Church Newsletter



2084 Wilson Pike · Franklin, TN 37067 · 615.794.2665
Pastor Dennis Meaker: 615.794.2665 · djmeaker@gmail.com

July 29, 2015

John Wesley on the Relationship Between Justice, Wealth and Hunger

Part Two

(Reprinted from 2013)

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.' Matthew 25:42-43 NRSV

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? James 2:15-16 NRSV.

This article was inspired by the words of a Tennessee Congressman implying that helping the poor was somehow contrary to Christian teaching. In the first part of the article I discussed the misuse of scripture involved in the Congressman's pronouncement and then went on to examine the biblical concept of Justice. In scripture, Justice and Righteousness are described as attributes of the nature of God and are concepts that are central to living a life focused on God. Indeed, the biblical prophecies that Christians focus upon that foretold the birth of Christ speak of Christ bringing forth a Kingdom founded upon God's Justice and Righteousness. Moreover, Justice and Righteousness as described in scripture includes care for the poor and those who are oppressed. The prophet Isaiah goes so far as declaring that the worship God desires is care for one another:

*⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs 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? Isaiah 58:6-7 NRSV*

Wesley understood hunger and poverty in ways that many of his fellow churchmen didn't. He took seriously the admonition in Matthew 25:31-46 to seek out and help the poor, the sick and those in jail. This was as much to convert the person offering help as to help the poor. Wesley firmly believed

that God used these encounters to reshape our souls. For Wesley and the early Methodists, acts of love and justice, including helping to feed and clothe the poor, were a means of receiving God's grace.

Wesley also viewed poverty as a condition that drew, or tempted, people away from God. Wesley was intimately familiar with the conditions of those living in poverty. In his Sermon **Heaviness through Manifold Temptation** (a reference to 1 Peter 1:6 KJV) Wesley spoke of the effect poverty has on a person's faith. He began by quoting the words of a Roman poet: ... *the worst thing about poverty was that it caused others to ridicule you.. to laugh at you.* He then went on to say this about the reality of experiencing poverty and the hunger that always accompanied it:

*Has poverty nothing worse in it than this, that it makes men liable to be laughed at? It is a sign this idle poet talked by rote of the things **which he knew not.** Is not want of food something worse than this? God pronounced it as a curse upon man, that he should earn it "by the sweat of his brow." **But how many are there in this Christian country, that toil, and labour, and sweat, and have it [food] not at last, but struggle with weariness and hunger together?** Is it not worse for one, after a hard day's labour, to come back to a poor, cold, dirty, uncomfortable lodging, and to find there not even the food which is needful to repair his wasted strength? **You that live at ease in the earth, that want nothing but eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand how well God hath dealt with you, — is it not worse to seek bread day by day, and find none?** perhaps to find the comfort also of five or six children crying for what he has not to give! Were it not that he is restrained by an unseen hand, would he not soon "curse God and die?" O want of bread! want of bread! Who can tell what this means, unless he hath felt it himself? I am astonished it occasions no more than heaviness even in them that believe!*

Meeting the needs of the poor was an issue of justice for Wesley. But he was also concerned about what had caused this situation where thousands were going hungry. Wesley wrote an essay about the causes of hunger in 1773. The essay was titled **Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions.** At this time thousands were starving throughout England. In the essay, Wesley gives examples of women scavenging dung hills for food for their children, or collecting bones the dogs have finished with. One woman told Wesley the family dog went into the streets and brought back a good bone from which she made a meal.

Wesley then examined what was happening and provided this analysis:

1. **People are out of work.** Wesley says that employers have laid off workers because no one is spending the little money they have on goods. It is all going for food.
2. **Why is food so expensive?** Grain corn is going to distilleries. Wesley objected to drinking distilled spirits on the basis that it destroyed families through alcoholism **and** because it drove up the price of corn making bread prohibitively expensive. But oats and grain going to distilleries was not the only problem. Wesley noted that:
 - Oats and Bartley are going to feed expensive horses that draw the carriages of the rich. The rich are keeping more horses than ever before because it had become the fashion on the continent of Europe to have large teams of horses pulling private carriages. Having a large team of horses pulling your carriage was a symbol of your wealth and status.

- For the same reason, fewer people are raising cows and sheep. Horses are a better investment. They can be sold for livery or exported, primarily to France.
 - Pork, poultry and eggs were expensive because of the sudden creation of large farms. Estates that used to be home for 20 tenant farmers, each of which would raise a few pigs and chickens and sell the produce, had been consolidated. They now had only one or two farmers and were devoted to raising grain for distilling or for raising horses.
 - The food that was available was wasted by the rich. With the rich fighting over it, the price of food again went up well out of reach of the common poor.
3. **Land is expensive.** Because of the money that could be raised by selling grain and horses, the price of land had skyrocketed along with the level of rent for the land.
 4. **Taxes are high:** Taxes had been steadily increasing, something that was to become a factor in sparking the American Revolution. High rents were also needed to pay the taxes.
 5. **Taxes are so high because of the National Debt.** The King had been waging wars for some years and also supporting a large standing army, including the troops garrisoned in the Americas. This had run up the national debt pushing up taxes.

To sum up the whole, in Wesley's estimation thousands of people throughout the land were perishing for want of food. This was owing to various causes but, above all, to the loss of grain to distilling and supporting a lavish lifestyle for the rich. For Wesley this was a justice issue that could not be solved by simply raising money to buy food for the poor. There needed to be a fundamental change in society.

To some extent, the Methodist Societies brought about a change in English society by "redistributing the wealth." It came about this way.

1. **Come and See:** Methodist Societies focused on spreading the Gospel. When people expressed an interest in becoming Christian they were not simply invited to accept Christ as Lord and savior, but to "Come and See" how the Methodists lived out their faith. Methodists lived out their faith through the work of the "classes."
2. **Small Groups:** Each Methodist society was organized into "classes" of 12 with a Class Leader. In addition to regular meetings for prayer and study, the Class Leader would be responsible for visiting the other class members and helping make sure they received help if they were in need. Also, each Class member was expected to donate a penny a week to support the ministries of the Methodist societies. If a family was too poor to make the contribution, the Class Leader, always one of the wealthier members of the society, made up the difference. To those who had been richly blessed, much was expected.
3. **Ministry with those in need.** The money thus raised was used by the Methodist Societies to open food kitchens that could bake bread for the poor, to establish schools for the poor, to establish orphanages and to establish clinics. In effect, the Methodist societies became a social safety net for England. Some historians credit the work of the Methodist societies for saving England from the type of revolution that engulfed France later that century.

- 4. Fishing poles instead of fish:** Because of the support offered by the Methodist societies, and the mutual support of Christians in ministry together, many of the early Methodists worked their way out of poverty. Indeed, one of Wesley's greatest concerns for the Church was that its members would become wealthy and indifferent to the Gospel's call to be in ministry to the poor and one another.

In conclusion, it is not as easy as some suggest to separate out the work of the church with the work of Government. Simply because the church is called to be in ministry to the poor does not mean that there isn't a need for changes in the way we govern ourselves or a need to provide governmental assistance to those in need. As Christians we live in the world and do not leave our Christianity outside the polling booth or outside the doors of the legislature. Above all, those who would suggest there isn't a call in scripture to reach out to those in need are simply ignoring whole portions of scripture. Although we might find the concept uncomfortable, care for those who are poor is a matter of God's Justice and Righteousness that concerns every Christian.

You Feed Them (Contempt for the Poor)

(As preached on July 26, 2015. Several have asked for this text so I decided to include it in this weeks' newsletter).

"Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" A strange song for Sunday morning perhaps, but I asked Lynn to see what he could do with it. It is a very poignant song because it touches on a truth that we seem to be overlooking today. Poverty is not a moral condition. You aren't a bad person if you are poor. And usually poverty is not a lifestyle choice. The man in the song has built and managed railroads, built skyscrapers, gone off to war. He was known by everyone and called by name. He still has all those skills and he wants to work. But he is out of work and needs help.

Like many of you, my parents grew up during the depression. I remember them talking about the experience. How very skilled and formerly hard working people couldn't find any work. My maternal grandfather was a master carpenter who was out of skilled work for years. He took the unskilled jobs he could get and even those were few and far between. Yet, the people got through those years because many of them worked together. They helped one another. They understood that being poor, being out of work, was not a moral failing; was not a lifestyle choice.

Some contempt for the poor is nothing new. It was present during the depression. It fills the works of Charles Dickens and the works of many other authors. The fact that the poor are held in contempt by some is even mentioned in scripture. There are even proverbs that point out that the wealthy have many friends but the poor have few.

However, something new has been happening over the last couple of decades. Utter contempt for the poor is starting to be touted as a virtue in this nation. The attitude seems to be that the poor are supposed to be shamed into doing better. This supposed virtue of contempt for the poor was prominent in our last two presidential campaigns and I suspect that it will be so again. More than that, politicians are seeking to use the scripture to support contempt for the poor as a virtue. And that, in my view, is unacceptable. We can choose to be selfish and self-centered, we can ignore the poverty of others in our midst, but such conduct must not be touted as a Christian virtue.

At the risk of being accused of being political I want to correct this particular political message. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, virtuous, from a Christian standpoint, in showing contempt for the poor. In point of fact, such an attitude is about as unchristian and unbiblical as you can get. Three arguments are made by people advocating contempt for the poor: first that it is somehow supported in scripture; second that Jesus supported at least ignoring the poor; and third that the bible never speaks about “government” helping the poor. All three contentions are false.

II.

Scripture is very clear about the issue of contempt for the poor. Contempt for the poor is contempt for God.

*²¹ Those who despise their neighbors are sinners,
but happy are those who are kind to the poor. Proverbs 14:21*

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

*⁵ Those who mock the poor insult their Maker;
those who are glad at calamity will not go unpunished. Prov 17:5*

Within the last week the headquarters of a State political party posted a comment on its web site comparing feeding the poor with feeding animals in the park. Feeding the poor, it said, was destroying self-sufficiency! Really, feeding a hungry child destroys his self-sufficiency? How about feeding a disabled veteran? Many receiving foodstamps are disabled veterans. Do they need to be taught self-sufficiency by a congressman who inherited his wealth? How about the elderly poor. People who have worked hard all their lives! Do they need to be taught self-sufficiency through going hungry? Do they deserve the contempt of their elected representatives? Do they deserve our contempt?

We aren't talking about feeding the animals in the parks. We are talking about helping out our brothers and sisters. People who **we say** we believe are children of God just as we are children of God.

These are all Old Testament references. Want to hear the New Testament? Consider the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Luke 16:19. The Rich Man ends up in eternal punishment. What was his crime? Ignoring Lazarus's suffering. Lazarus was languishing at the Rich Man's gate yet the Rich Man never helps him.

Or Paul in 2 Corinthians 8. He calls for help for the poor from the Corinthians. The idea, he says, is not to give away all you have so you have nothing, but to share what you have so that:

*2 Corinthians 8:15 (NRSV)
¹⁵ As it is written,
“The one who had much did not have too much,
and the one who had little did not have too little.”*

Or James 2:14-17

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.

I've heard politicians say that the bible does not call upon us to help one another. That there is no concept of social justice in scripture. No concept of charity for the poor. Every week in the Newsletter I include material from the Poverty and Justice bible. I quote those scriptures that call on us to care for one another. There are around 2000 such scriptures. I've barely scratched the surface in almost two years of articles. Contempt for the poor is contrary to the Gospel.

III.

Well say some politicians, Jesus supported ignoring the needs of the poor. I heard this quoted several times during the last election. A couple of years ago a Tennessee Congressman who received farm subsidies himself used this argument to cut foodstamps. The passage they are referring to is Matthew 26:11:

¹¹ For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.

A similar passage appears in Mark and John. Judas is complaining because Jesus is allowing himself to be anointed with expensive perfume that could have been sold and the money used to help the poor. The politicians use this passage to argue that Jesus declared that we will always have the poor with us so we shouldn't bother to help them. In point of fact, Jesus was doing what he so often did. He was quoting from the Torah. The Law. Deuteronomy 15:11 states:

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."

Jesus is saying that you must **always** help the poor. That is the law. That does not mean that you stop caring about others. You can do both.

Want something more? There is much in the Gospels about the poor. How about Matthew 25:40 et.seq.

"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."

Or Luke 6:20

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

Jesus demanded that we help the poor. Jesus was not indifferent to the poor.

IV.

“Well,” say the politicians, “the Bible never says anything about the government helping the poor. All help for the poor should be private charity.” That is absolutely false. The Bible is filled with commands to the prevailing government to help the poor.

First, understand that the Old Testament was written to guide the people of Israel; that is the nation of Israel; its people **and** its government. Any command in scripture to the people of Israel applies to its King; the government. Everything quoted above from the Old Testament, including the admonition that the poor will always be with us so we must care for them, is a command to the King as well.

Then consider this Psalm which many believe was written as a prayer for King Solomon’s coronation.

Psalm 72:1–4 (NRSV)

*1 Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king’s son.
2 May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.
3 May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.
4 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.*

Treat the poor with justice; defend the cause of the poor; give deliverance to the needy.

Psalm 72:12–13 (NRSV)

*¹² For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.
¹³ He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.*

This is the prayer of the people for how their King should rule.

Then there is Proverbs:

Proverbs 28:3 (NRSV)

*³ A ruler who oppresses the poor
is a beating rain that leaves no food.*

A government that oppresses the poor is like a storm that destroys crops. Or Isaiah. What is the true worship of God?

*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? Isaiah 58:7

Ezekiel explains to the Nation of Judah why God allowed them to be taken into bondage. It was because of their sin which was greater than that of Sodom (as in Sodom and Gomorrah). And what was Sodom's sin?

⁴⁹This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. Ezekiel 16:49

Ezekiel then tells Judah, the nation, that it did even worse than Sodom.

I could go on all morning and if anyone wants to discuss these scriptures further as well as the many I haven't mentioned I'd be glad to do so. Just know that the commands of the bible are commands to the individual and commands to the nation. The bible says that God expects kings, governments and individuals to care for the poor.

And we are the government. Is there any doubt in your mind that if the voters demanded help for the poor, insisted on it, that the politicians would have to at least look at these issues again? But that call isn't being made by Christians because the media, our politicians and, God forgive them, even some pastors are telling us that the poor aren't worth helping. And we aren't arguing.

Conclusion

In today's Gospel reading, (John 6:1-21) Jesus' Disciples try to get out of feeding the crowd. It will be too expensive they say. Six months' salary wouldn't be enough to pay for the food they'd need. Jesus tells them to go ahead and do it anyway. And with the blessings of God, there is enough. Throwing money at programs for the poor may not be a solution, but there is no question that this nation can afford to feed everyone, especially our children, our disabled veterans and our senior citizens. We are throwing away tons of food every day. Helping the poor is an obligation laid upon us, and our nation, by God. Contempt for the poor is not a Christian virtue.

Thursday Morning Bible Study

A group within the Church has expressed an interest in a Bible Study on Thursday mornings between 10:00 and 11:30. We will begin that study on August 20th. Anyone is welcome to attend. It has been my practice to allow the group to decide what parts of the bible they wish to study. I will be polling them in the weeks ahead. If you would like to be a part of this study and have a portion of the bible you would especially like to study please send me a note, give me a call or talk to me here at the Church.

New Disciple Bible Study

Disciple Bible Study is a powerful experience that can open the bible up for the participants. I would be willing to begin a new class this Fall if at least seven people desired to undertake the 34 week study. I could do this study on Monday or Tuesday nights between 7 and 9. If participants would prefer to meet on a week day that could also be arranged. If you are interested please contact me at the Church. If you desire additional information for yourself or to give to a friend I have some explanatory booklets available.

The Poverty and Justice Bible

*You women of Samaria
are fat cows!
You mistreat and abuse
the poor and needy,
then you say to your husbands,
“Bring us more drinks!” Amos 4:1 CEV*

Amos was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He was preaching to the Capital City of Samaria (not to be confused with the whole province of Samaria as it existed in the first century when Jesus lived). The City of Samaria had two classes of people: the very rich and the very poor. Here he chides the wives of the rich who build their lives of ease on the backs of the poor.

*²¹ The servant told his master what happened, and the master became so angry that he said, “Go as fast as you can to every street and alley in town! Bring in everyone who is poor or crippled or blind or lame.”
Luke 14:21 CEV*

The story of the Great Banquet appears in different forms in both Luke and Matthew. The typical practice in the first century was to invite people to a banquet who were on the same, or higher, social strata. In Luke’s parable the host’s guests have offered concocted excuses for not coming, insulting him. His response is to instead invite those people who would never be invited to such a feast. This is consistent with the advice Jesus gives in Luke 14:12-14 to invite those who could never pay you back for your hospitality.

=====

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.

Prayer Ministry

The following persons are part of the prayer ministry at Trinity UMC:

Elva Beard	Mac McAfee	Kenneth Stevens	Judy Richardson
Larry Eastwood	Rachel Newman	Patricia Stevens	Charles Wilson
Leslie Eastwood	Erin McKibben	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

August 2nd: The Duty of Constant Communion. Why should we celebrate communion? How often should we celebrate communion. These issues are hundreds of years old. John Wesley had some thoughts on the subject from over 300 years ago. My texts are Isaiah 25:6-10 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

August 9th: I will be on vacation. The guest pastor is Dustin Miller, a Brentwood Police Officer and Chaplin for the Brentwood Police Department.

Worship Leader's Schedule

August 2

Linda Robinson, **Liturgist**
Maurice & Joyce Edwards, **Greeters**
Rodger & Cherry Klein, **Ushers**

August 9

Rachel Newman, **Liturgist**
Tommy & Jo Cotton, **Greeters**
Mike & Elaine Rohrig, **Ushers**

Announcements

The "Nanette Crowell Companions in Christ" Sunday School class has begun the sequel to "Knowing God." **This study is, "Loving God."** We have extra books and extra chairs if you would care to join our class. **The class will be meeting promptly at 9:45 rather than 10:00.** All are welcome to this time of learning, refreshment and fellowship.

July Birthdays

Mac McAfee, Leslie Eastwood, Linda Robinson, Renita Hartsock

Happy Birthday to each of you!