

September 14, 2014

TEXT: Acts 4:32 – 5:11

TITLE: Foundations of Faith: On Poverty & Wealth

The question can be asked: What are the foundations of your faith when it comes to big things like war, like poverty, like joy? It is only by asking these questions that answers, even partial ones, become available to us as we travel down the road of life on “this day which the Lord has made.” So today, as we consider the topic of poverty and wealth, where should we start?

Perhaps we start with statistics. According to census data, if you drive across Pennsylvania the statewide poverty rate is 13% or about 1 in 7 people. If you drive through Pittsburgh, the number of people living in poverty ranges from about 20% in Bloomfield, to 33% in East Liberty, 44% in Garfield, to as high as over 55% in Homewood. These are our neighbors, and more importantly, these averages are true for folks sitting beside you in your pews. Or consider this: 1 in 4 children in America live in poverty and don’t know where their next meal is coming from. Or this: If you leave church and eat somewhere around here, the Federal minimum wage for the person who brought you your lunch is only \$2.13 per hour. Keep that in mind when you leave a tip.

Statistics tell part of the poverty story, but since we’re in church and not in a Pitt sociology class, perhaps we should be guided on this topic by what it says in scripture. In the gospel of Luke, the first of Jesus’ Beatitudes says, *“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”* (Lk 6:20). That sounds encouraging, until we flip a few pages and read, *“Do not be afraid, little flock; it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”* (Lk 12:32-34). A few pages later we read, *“Therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions”* (Lk 14:33). Then comes the story of the rich young ruler who has kept all the commandments since his youth, but who is told by Jesus: *“Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven”* (Lk18:22).

Jesus’ requirement about selling one’s possessions sounds uncomfortably clear-cut. Perhaps instead of various passages from Luke’s gospel, we should just stick to the bible stories that were read today. But, if you recall, those passages don’t make this topic any easier. Patrice read a parable about a man thrown in prison for owing millions of dollars. His debt was graciously forgiven. But when this same man couldn’t find it in his heart to forgive someone who owed him hundreds of dollars, his pardon was revoked and he wound up back behind bars. Likewise, the stories from Acts 4 & 5 are teaching stories from the early church. Barnabas was a good disciple, who sold his field and brought the money to the disciples to benefit any who were in need. But when Ananias and Sapphira sold their property, they lied to God and to the disciples; and because of their literal and spiritual dishonesty, they were struck dead as a warning for us all.

Some of you may be thinking, “Great! Here it is Visitors’ Sunday and these are the bible stories Randy picked for today.” I admit these are unusual passages and poverty is a difficult subject to address. But talk about it we must because poverty was a critical issue for Jesus and remains so for us and the church today.

My first job was as a sacker in a grocery store, and I wasn’t very good at it. I was 16 years old and had to job of getting the items rolling down the checkout counter into brown paper bags. From my perspective it was a type of spatial puzzle; and in my mind the goal was to do it as efficiently as possible using as few bags as possible. So I routinely ended up packing bags too heavy, sending home little old ladies with bulging sacks I could manhandle into their trunks but which were hard for them to unload into their houses. The letter of the Grocery Sackers’ Law said I should fill the bags quickly and efficiently. But the spirit of the law said I should deliver the groceries in such a way that the customer could easily move them from their car to their cupboards. Do you see the difference here?

Example #1: Barnabas, Ananias and Sapphira all sold their property to benefit the poor in the early church. They followed the letter of the law. But Ananias and Sapphira broke the spirit of the law, willfully lying and trying to deceive others. Example #2: The rich young ruler kept the letter of the law and commandments, which was commendable, but he couldn’t honor the spirit of the law, trusting in Jesus enough to sell his possessions and follow Christ. Example #3: The king had every right to keep the debtor in prison forever according to the letter of the law, but he forgave him out of a generous spirit that takes precedence over the letter of the law – until the ungrateful prisoner could not find an ounce of that same spirit in his own heart and due to his harsh actions ended up back in prison again.

To handle our money and resources faithfully always involves more of the spirit of the Lord’s law than the letter of the law. The author John Fowles once wrote: “Wealth in itself and rich men in themselves are innocent. But wealth and rich men surrounded by poverty and poor men are guilty.”¹ This is a hard subject, even for us here as a church to consider. We struggle to pay our own employees adequate wages. There are some on our payroll who work two jobs. Our Personnel Committee is looking at this problem and hopes to make progress on this with our budget next year, but it is a challenge. And it is not a challenge that is solved by simply bashing the rich or big business, for without a strong business sector, where are the jobs going to be to move people out of poverty? Yet it is true, as the sociologist Max Weber reminds us, the church too often serves to legitimate the privileged classes’ place in society. And to do that is wrong – if not according to the letter of the law, certainly according to the spirit of God’s law.

What then can we do about poverty? We need to look in the mirror and look around us with eyes of faith, guided by the spirit of God’s law. We should celebrate with the generous Barnabas’s in our midst while denouncing the

Ananias's and Sapphrias – in the end trusting that with God, all things are possible. Let me offer some negative and positive examples. Oil man John D. Rockefeller was a devout churchman who once claimed that “the growth of a large business is merely a [matter of] survival of the fittest.” However, as reporter Ida Tarbell exposed in the late 1800s, Rockefeller's survival of the fittest involved price wars, courtroom evasions and coercive business tactics. Rockefeller made an alliance with the railroads to greatly raise the rates for shipping oil while giving secret rebates to companies aligned with him so as to bankrupt anybody that refused to become part of his monopoly.² Even if the letter of the law was the “survival of the fittest,” the spirit of Christian law was not honored by Mr. Rockefeller's business practices.

Can anything be done to change how people view this tension between wealth and poverty? One simple solution is to work diligently to ensure that there is a floor beneath which no one falls. Right now 1 in 4 workers in America have no vacation or paid holidays; 40% of employees do not earn a single paid sick day.³ Maternity leave and child-care provisions are woefully inadequate in our modern economy. And what we spend on imprisoning people versus providing the necessary rehab and addiction recovery resources is far more criminal than the crimes they've committed. Working for the common good and common justice is how we can be faithful to both the letter and spirit of God's law.

In a similar way, have you heard about recent innovations such as Airbnb – an Internet program that lets you rent people's spare rooms for far less than what a hotel room would cost – or the ride-share programs Über and Lyft that have recently been in the news? Some suggest that we live now in the “Netflix economy” – that we rent the things we need rather than purchasing them. We rent movies on demand; we share a ride with someone else instead of using our own car. These are growing, creative business models that allow people to turn their personal resources into entrepreneurial opportunities. In the old days, you used to borrow a cup of sugar from your neighbor. Now suddenly the world is your neighbor. You can connect with people in Pittsburgh or Asia, using things you each need in common, building bridges of trust and new patterns of how to use the resources of this world.⁴ Not monopolies and survival of the fittest, but working together for the common good and a global economic community.

In those contrasting stories of Barnabas vs. Ananias and Sapphira, the last verse says that “fear seized the whole (ekklesia), the whole church.” This is the first time in the bible that the word “church” is written. Suddenly this group of faithful and foolish folks is seen as common followers of Christ – sharing things as needed, voluntarily selling and giving of their resources so that all might be well. It is in the context of this story that “church” is defined – not piously at the cross, or charismatically at Pentecost, but practically as this group of believers sorted out their property, their wealth, their spiritual values together. Think about that.

Lastly, remember how this passage began – vs. 32 & 33: *The whole group of believers was of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all.* The good news of Jesus' resurrection made this economic justice possible. Their changed lives, as seen economically, was how the world knew that Jesus had been raised from the dead. So the question for us is: Why don't we look more resurrected ourselves? How can our dollars and cents' choices better reflect the good news of a risen Christ? Living out the answer to that question is when the spirit of Christ's law is taken to heart and our common calling as an "ekklesia", a church of Christ, becomes obvious to all the world.

¹ John Fowles, The Aristos, 8:4.

² Cf. Wikipedia article on John D. Rockefeller; Doris Kearns Goodwin, The Bully Pulpit, p. 171.

³ Ellen Bravo, "Standards for Paid Time Off," *New York Times*, September 7, 2014.

⁴ Clair Cain Miller, "Is Owning Overrated? The Rental Economy Rises", *New York Times*, 9/7/14.