

Feast of All Saints, 2014

Vernon Township and its surrounding community has been hit hard by the recession. Store fronts stand empty. For sale signs are on every block. Former resort communities resemble rural slums. “Town Center” and other projects mock the ignorance, arrogance, and greed that spawned them.

In our own church, we have seen terminations, layoffs, long periods of un- and under- employment, foreclosures, repossessions, reduced SNAP and child care assistance, as well as a steady trail of our members leaving the area for work or to escape rising costs. Our younger people can’t find work. Our older people can’t afford to stay.

Our situation mirrors that of the country at large. Nationwide, capital is moving to



The bistros and boutiques of Town Center



The former Great Gorge Playboy Club

cheaper sources of labor supply. Plant closings, corporate takeovers, incessant capital-intensive automation, and ballooning deficits are the mere foreshadows of a more haunting specter: the bifurcation of our own socio-economic context into two separate worlds, unequal and divided.

On one side of that divide stands a professional and managerial elite and the corporate interests they serve. On the other, there is a growing, self-perpetuating, displaced underclass, and an increasingly harried, anxious and “left behind” working class. There is virtually no middle class

left. The wealthiest 10% of U.S. families now own 86% of the nation’s wealth; the bottom 55% operate with zero or negative financial assets. The 400 richest Americans now own more wealth than the bottom 150 million combined.

As F. Scott Fitzgerald said, “The very rich are different from you and me.”

High interest rates, revolving credit, subprime loan scams, rent to own schemes, title pawn, vehicle leasing, late penalties and fees, court costs, permanent temporary employment, lack of child care, benefit avoidant scheduling, and wage theft, are part of the growing network of poverty capitalism that keep working class families trapped at the bottom of the economy. As a statistical group, adjusted for inflation, not only has much of the middle class not had a raise in almost three decades, but the purchasing power of their salary against inflation has declined by 20%. Education, skill, experience: none of these are protection against waking up as a member of our country’s “new working poor.”

As our grandparents would say, “The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer.”

It is tempting to just shrug our shoulders and rationalize that even the poorest of our community struggle less than those in third or fourth world countries. In a global context, it seems hardly fair to complain about the cost of New Jersey commuting, until you watch the cascading effects of a disabled vehicle costing a single mom her fast food job, imperiling her ability feed her children, or even keep them housed and warm. Worldwide, people in other cultures might consider a gone-to-seed summer cottage a palace. But for its elderly, enfeebled, stranded and lonely inhabitant; without adequate heat or food; being cold, hungry, and without family feels the same as it would half way around the world.

The prophet Jeremiah instructs us in the name of God: “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have sent you into exile.”(29:7) The pastoral epistles have harsh words for those who will not care for their own people. The New Testament concept of neighbor has to do with proximity: the one next to you, the one you encounter daily. We may live in “the richest country in the world.” But, we are not allowed to ignore human pain just because it lives next door. That we cannot solve problems for people on another continent, does not excuse us from helping the people who live in our own community.

It is tempting to say that this is a political or economic problem. “*Stay in the pulpit, Pastor.*” Separation of church and state: let the government take care of “those people.” But, again, the Biblical narrative will not abide it:

In its most basic outlines, the Exodus event itself is the story of a people working as “guest labor” in the land of Egypt who are gradually find themselves forced into slavery. The oppressive experience of building wealth for Pharaoh quietly erodes the inner spirit and resilience of the people until they are left moaning inarticulately in their brokenness. The story of this people's liberation from bondage is most remarkable for the kind of God to which it testifies. Yahweh appears on the scene as one who champions the cause of the poor and oppressed. They are taken notice of, their cries heard, and their longing for escape honored.

“Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, for the LORD will take up their case and will exact life for life.” (Proverbs 22:22-23) “One who oppresses the poor to increase his wealth and one who gives gifts to the rich--both come to poverty.” (Proverbs 22:16)



The Rich Man and Lazarus – Luke 16:19-31

“Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.” (Zechariah 7:10)

“So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me,” says the LORD Almighty.” (Malachi 3:5)

The Christian scriptures are likewise relentless:

The rich and powerful found themselves painfully surprised by Jesus' talk of reversal (Mark. 10:31; 12:1-12). Radical change was demanded of them (Luke. 18:18-30), curses were called down upon their heads (Luke. 6:24-25; Mathew. 23:13-36), dinner parties became occasions of challenge (Luke. 7:36-50). If they allowed themselves to be moved in the direction of concrete sharing with the poor, they might even be affirmed. (Luke 10:25-37; 19:1-10).



The marginalized, on the other hand, found themselves addressed as those to whom the kingdom belonged (Luke. 6:30). With them Jesus kept company (Mark. 3:20, 31-35); among them he did works of power (Mark, 1:40-45; 2:1-12); to them he looked for models of faithfulness (Mark. 5:24-34); upon them he depended for protection (Mark. 12:12; Luke. 19:46-47); and because of them he leapt for joy (Mathew. 11:25; Luke. 10:21). The "challenge" issued to them consisted primarily in "blessing" them (Mark 19:3-15; Luke. 6:20-22), with shared meals and friendship (Luke. 15:1; 10:38-42; Mark. 6:30-44; John 6:1-14).

+ + +

Just as in the times of Moses and Pharaoh, the oppressive experience of building wealth for the wealthy still quietly erodes the inner spirit and resilience of the people until they are left moaning inarticulately in their brokenness. God still hears their cry and will surely will champion their cause. We pray to God that this comes by renewal and reform, rather than the violent revolution we see elsewhere.

The prophets will not let us forget that God is waiting for a response from us:

“The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the foreigner without redress. And I sought for one among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that it should not be destroyed; but I found none.” (Ezek. 22:29-30)

Does this mean us, Lord? Do you mean to send me?

My hope is that we can begin to have a conversation, rooted in prayer and reflection.

An initial list of questions:

- Are “extortion” and “robbery” far too pejorative a label to apply to our consumer culture’s financial practices, even in the face of rising “poverty capitalism?”
- For those of us living on—or in sight of—the margins of our society, are we willing to claim the label “marginalized?” Are we willing to apply the terms “oppressed” or “exploited” to ourselves,

our children, our parents? Has there been a point—a tipping point—in our lives where “the tables got turned?”

- What role might pride (as one of the classical “deadly sins”) play in defending ourselves from this discussion?
- At St. Thomas’ we have our food pantry and holiday ministries. We house displaced families for Family Promise. We support the Vernon Clergy Association emergency fund. Are we supposed to do more?
- If so, what?
- As Christians, where are the boundaries between charity and justice?
- As Christians, where are the boundaries between a private and public witness? Between an active, engaged spirituality and a private contemplative spirituality?
- Are we called to just pray for God to help people or, are we the Incarnation, The Body, through which that help is supposed to come?
- Is the income disparity in our culture even any of the church’s business?
- Are the poor and “nouveau poor” victims of our economic culture, or just their bad choices as individuals—our corporate sinfulness, or simply their personal sins?

An initial list of resources:

- ***Inequality for All***, a film by former labor Secretary Robert Reich. [Website](#). [Netflix](#).
- [“It is Expensive to be Poor,” Barbara Enrenreich, *The Atlantic*](#)
- [The Episcopal Network for Economic Justice](#)
- NYT:
 - [“Expanding the World of Poverty Capitalism”](#)
 - [“Part-Time Work Becomes Full-Time Wait for Better Job”](#)
 - [“Part-Time Schedules, Full-Time Headaches”](#)
 - [“Unsteady Incomes Keep Millions of Workers Behind on Bills”](#)
- [A Resolution on Economic Income Inequality and Economic Justice Adopted by the Diocese of Vermont](#)

ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY JUSTIN WELBY

Q. Why is income inequality a religious issue?

A. It tends to result in the development of over mighty areas within society, and at the same time of people who are excluded and forgotten. Therefore it becomes an issue about the nature of the value of the human being, the dignity of the human being, which is a religious issue. The human being for whom Christ died is of equal value, whoever they are.

Q. Should the church have a preference for the poor over the rich?

A. Liberation theology in Latin America talked about God’s preference to the poor, God’s bias to the poor. There is emphatically in Scripture a tradition, a sense of God’s bias to the poor, and you see that in the origins of the Christian church. And the church around the world is generally poor, including the Anglican Church and the vast majority of its membership.

I think there is such a thing as God’s bias to the poor. It’s not God’s bias against the rich, it’s not a zero-sum game. It’s not that God sort of has only a certain amount of preference he can give, and if he doesn’t give it to the rich he has to give it to the poor; and if he gives it to the poor, he can’t love the rich.

We see within the life and ministry of Jesus a challenge to the rich to love the poor as God loves the poor: in the same way, with the same intention, and with the same generosity.

I invite you to talk to God, to me, and each other. If there are enough people interested in this issue, we will form a workgroup to explore what God might be calling us to do, here, now, and in the community in which we are planted.



The Rev. Dr. Howard W. Whitaker
St.thomas.vicarage@howardwhitaker.net