

Everyone Does Better When Everyone Does Better

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*Sixteen tons and what do you get?
Another day older and deeper in debt.
St. Peter don't you call me, 'cause I can't go.
I owe my soul to the company store.*

The opposite of poverty is not wealth. It is justice. —Leonardo Boff,
theologian

Readings: Deuteronomy 15:1-11
Luke 4:18-19

A few years ago Paul Krugman, a columnist for the New York Times and economist at Princeton said that the economic inequality in this country is worse than we may think and that the real economic winners in the rising inequality are not the top 20% or even the top 10%. He wrote:

Instead, we're seeing the rise of a narrow oligarchy: income and wealth are becoming increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small, privileged elite.

In a 30 year span, wage and salary income for those in the 90th percentile rose about 1% a year, but for the 99th percentile it rose 87%, for the 99.9th percentile it rose 181%, and for the 99.99th percentile it rose 495% (those who make \$1/2 million to over \$6 million a year). Krugman concluded that this idea that we have a rising oligarchy is very disturbing.

Remember, Krugman is a pretty mainstream economist, and he pointed out that even ultra-conservative Alan Greenspan has repeatedly warned that growing inequality poses a threat to democratic society.

I'm reminded of a famous quote by the former Supreme Court Justice, Louis Brandeis:

We can either have democracy in this country or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we cannot have both.

Now, anyone who knows me also knows that this topic is a major theme in my preaching over the last 20 years. And this growing income gap has only become worse in the past 20 years, not better.

Robert Reich, another economist, reminded us that in the 1950's and 60's, the CEO's of major American companies took home about 25 to 30 times the wages of the typical worker. BY 1980 the big company CEO took home roughly 40 times the worker's wage. By 1990, it was 100 times. And by 2007, executives at the largest American companies received about 350 times the pay of the average employee.

We have recently witnessed a huge transfer of wealth from the bottom 90% to that small economic elite--\$4.6 trillion was pumped into the Wall Street banks. And then we saw the obscene bonuses paid out to many executives of the failed institutions.

I read where the top 25 hedge fund managers made an *average* of \$1 billion *each* in 2009, a year of decline for most of us. Meanwhile, if you factor for inflation, wages for those in the lower and middle classes have fallen over the past 30 years.

And here is part of what I have to say today: *Any social system that results in an ever-growing gap of wealth is unjust.* Any society that yields such inequality is sinful. Now hear me out.

I'm not talking about sin the way you hear most preachers talk about it, as individual morality. That is so often self-serving. I'm talking about it as a social condition—sin we all participate in by virtue of being in a given society. As Abraham Heschel once said, "Some are guilty, but all are responsible." We all bear some responsibility for a system that produces a few jackpot winners and many losers.

This is what the prophets talked about. This is what the concept of justice is about. There is something called "social sin." Playing by the rules is not enough, because the rules are rigged. And the way we know this is by the results. "By their fruits you shall know them."

There are so many, in the tradition of the Pharisees, who love to focus on personal morality and private piety. And they like to go after anyone who doesn't measure up to their idea of personal morality. And in so doing, they imagine themselves to be moral. It was that great theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, who said,

There is an increasing tendency among modern [people] to imagine themselves ethical because they have delegated their vices to larger and larger groups. (Moral Man and Immoral Society)

And both for Jesus and the rest of the Bible, the overriding concern for social sin was not sex, it was economics. And yet we hear virtually nothing from the pulpits on this subject.

I like how Jesus, the prophets and Judaism dealt with the social sin of economic disparity. Basically they don't focus so much on the "why," although they did talk a lot about greed and hard hearts. Rather, they focused on establishing equality and redistributing the wealth like the parent who says, "Look, I don't know who started it. I don't know who did what. And frankly, I don't care. All I want is for you to stop fighting, restore order and establish peace."

Old Testament scholar, Walter Breuggeman, calls the teaching in Deuteronomy 15 about the jubilee "the most radical teaching in the whole of the Bible." So, of course, I have to preach about it. What is the year of jubilee, and why is it so radical? Every seven years, according to Jewish law, all debts were forgiven and all servants were to be released, and after 49 years on the "year of jubilee," all property that had been in anyone's family was also returned to them.

What you had was money becoming concentrated into few and few hands, and people who lost their money and property—through a very regressive tax system (hardest on the poorest) to support the kingdom, for example—and so they were forced to become bonded servants. In the time of Jesus, for example, the taxes were so heavy upon the people that they often had to mortgage their property just to pay them. So the person would become a sharecropper, working to pay off the debt. But instead of paying it off, one would lose ground, becoming deeper and deeper in debt. And one day, the creditor demands that the mortgage is paid. When it is not, the land is

confiscated and the whole family is sold into slavery—men, women and children—to pay it off.

But this law in the Jewish Torah says that you never have to work more than six years and the rest of the debt is cancelled. And therefore, says Breuggeman, this law was designed so there would be *no permanent underclass*, when debt would grow so big that one can never get out of it.

New Testament scholar, Ched Myers, said,

This was intended as a hedge against the inevitable tendency of human societies to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of a few, creating hierarchical classes with the poor at the bottom.

And so what we have here is a *biblical principle of redistribution of wealth*. “The Deuteronomic tradition would never concede the autonomy of the market or of the economy,” said Breuggeman. “The forgiveness of debts subverts all conventional social relationships” and “breaks all vicious cycles of control and abuse.” The writers of Deuteronomy say that Israel went into exile because it did not practice neighborliness, in the economic realm and otherwise, and that they could only make it back to the “promised land” by remembering to order their lives in this way.

One of the books that had a large influence on me when I was going to college was *The Politics of Jesus*, by John Howard Yoder, which talks about the radical nature of the teachings of Jesus. It’s now a classic, and Yoder pointed out that Jesus, himself, quite clearly, carries forth this jubilee principle of redistribution of wealth.

It is Matthew’s version of the Jesus Prayer that we use that uses the word “debts,” while others have settled on Luke’s version that uses “trespasses.” Many scholars believe that the version in Matthew is the oldest, and therefore most authentic of the two. (Often the church tries to harmonize these two versions, with paraphrases saying, “forgive us our offenses” or “our sins as those who have sinned against us.”)

But there is a problem with this. (We almost always run into problems whenever we try to “harmonize” the scriptures.” The word, *opheilema*, or “debt,” always is used to specifically signify *monetary debt*. So according to Yoder, the prayer “tells us purely and simply to erase the debts of those who

owe us money.” It is a jubilee prayer, he said. It means “the time has come for the faithful people to abolish all the debts which tie the poor ones of Israel, for your debts toward God are also wiped away.” According to Yoder and others, Jesus thought that the essence of the jubilee should be followed.

Today’s Gospel reading from Luke is an account of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. It’s very significant because Luke is setting the tone for all of Jesus’ words and actions which are to follow. And so we have Jesus starting things off by standing up in th synagogue and reading Isaiah’s vision of the jubilee!

*The Spirit of God is upon me,
because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
God had sent me to proclaim
release of the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (jubilee year).*

Ched Myers concludes,

The Bible recognizes that inequalities will inevitably arise in a “fallen” society—a realism it shares with modern capitalism. Unlike the social Darwinism of the latter, however, the biblical vision refuses to stipulate that injustice is therefore a permanent condition. Instead, God’s people are instructed to dismantle, on a regular basis, the fundamental patterns and structures of stratified wealth and power, so that there is “enough for everyone.”

Now, almost all societies, to one extent or another, practice the principle of redistribution of wealth among their people. They provide for social safety nets and things for the public good. Sometimes this principle is under attack and in retreat, and sometimes it is more popular. Kevin Phillips in his book, *The Politics of Rich and Poor*, noted that in the United States we have gone through phases in which wealth has been concentrated into the hands of fewer people and then periods of redistribution of wealth.

For example, there was the Gilded Age which was followed by the Progressive Era; there was the Roaring Twenties which was followed by the New Deal. In those periods of extreme disparity of income and wealth and

large gap between the rich and poor, there was prosperity. However the prosperity was not shared. The numbers of super rich grew, as did corporate mergers. And many economists say that this was one cause of the Great Depression. Wealthy people had so much money that they were putting it into risky speculative investments. Everyone else was losing ground, defaulting on loans and had no money to stimulate the economy.

And so the idea of redistribution of wealth is important not just because it is biblical and morally important. But as it says in verse four of Deuteronomy 15, do this and “there will be no one in need among you.” In other words, *it works*. As the saying goes, *Everyone does better when everyone does better*. Many economists note that the tremendous prosperity enjoyed for a generation after World War II can be attributed to a new sharing of wealth and incredibly large middle-class that arose after the Depression and New Deal. This was the engine driving the economy. Even Henry Ford realized that his workers needed to be able to buy the product that they made, and so he paid an unprecedented salary for workers at that time. Writer William Greider wrote that this is precisely the problem with the global economy. It produces an excess supply and not enough people who can afford to buy it. The age-old wisdom that a broad distribution of wealth works is true. Everyone does better when everyone does better.

How do we do this? Well, there are many ways to apply the jubilee ethic of Judaism and Jesus. First, there is the concept of *progressive taxation*. This is the idea that the more one makes the higher the percentage one pays on taxes. After World War II the tax rate for the very top small economic elite in 1960 was about 91%. In the 70’s this went to about 70%. In 1987 it went down to 28%.

Recently a group of American millionaires have called for an end to the tax breaks that have benefited them! The group called Responsible Wealth said that the tax cuts in 2001 and 2003 overwhelmingly benefited wealthy taxpayers and will cost a total of \$2.5 trillion by the end of 2010. “Members of Responsible Wealth recognize that their own prosperity and success would not be possible without the foundation of a strong public education system, an effective transportation network, a strong legal system and more,” said the director. The group also opposes the abolition of the estate tax that applies to less than one percent of families but has generated \$1 trillion over the last decade. They understand that everyone does better when everyone does better.

I can't help but notice that the legislature of Arizona is proposing an increase of taxes for desperately needed funds for education and services, but with sales tax that is a *regressive* form of taxation.

Another way to apply the jubilee ethic is to *strengthen labor laws*. About 14 years ago, Paul Krugman wrote,

We should not idealize unions. Occasionally they were corrupt, and sometimes they enforced inefficiency. But they helped keep us a middle-class society because they provided a counterweight to the power of wealthy individuals and corporations. The loss of that counterweight is clearly bad for society.

The more power and political influence that corporations and wealthy elites acquire, the more the laws and policies favor them and the wealthier they become. This leads, in turn to greater power and influence, and we have this downward “spiral of inequality.” Historically, many churches were highly supportive of union organizing as labor struggled for a more level playing field and counter the growing power of corporations.

Bill Moyers last week interviewed the authors of a new book called *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*. The more equal the society, they said, the longer its people live, while the most unequal countries have more homicides, more obesity, more mental illness, more teen pregnancy, more high-school dropouts, and more people in prison. And they reported that the United States has the greatest inequality of income of any major developed country in the world.

Everyone does better when everyone does better. And when there is widespread suffering and inequality, the society suffers together.

The principle of the jubilee—of greater sharing of wealth, of more equal distribution in society—is at the heart of our religious tradition. Economic justice, concern for the “common good,” the well-being of the whole is affirmed by our religious tradition over and over again. Everyone does better when everyone does better.

I'll close with the words of the prophet Jeremiah, who said this same thing:

Woe to him, who builds his house by unrighteousness,
And his upper rooms by injustice.
Who makes his neighbors work for nothing,
And does not give them their wages;
Did not your ancestors eat and drink and do justice and righteousness?
Then it was well with them.
They judged the cause of the poor and needy;
Then all was well.
“Is this not to know me?” says our God.

