

October 31, 2021

Just Money and the Holey Bible

Isaiah 58: 1-9a

Mark 14: 3-9

This Sunday we continue in our series on Just Living and the pandemic church, with the hope that soon we will be the post-pandemic church. The idea is to focus on some of the larger themes related to what we have witnessed during this time, and to explore the church's role as we face these challenges in our new reality. I was given a couple different options of the theme I wanted to speak on and I chose Just Money. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Then I started to think about those passages with Jesus telling the rich young ruler to sell all his possessions and comparing his chances of entering the kingdom of God to that of a camel passing through the eye of the needle. They have always made me uncomfortable. Do I really want to be the one to tell others what they should be doing with their money? You will notice I have avoided choosing those as the scripture texts for today - I'll let the professionals tackle those another time. But maybe there are some other things that can be said on the topic of justice and money.

I am going to draw some inspiration for my thoughts this morning from the series of sermons presented this summer on individuals who have served as spiritual guides. One such person for me has been American writer and pastor Jim Wallis. I will refer to a few things from his writing. In his book "God's Politics" Wallis writes about a project he was involved with in seminary with some of his fellow students. They began by identifying all the verses in the Bible they could find that dealt with the themes of wealth and poverty, injustice and oppression, and to how the people of God were expected to respond to these subjects. They found several thousand verses, making it the second most prominent theme in the Old Testament, and one of every sixteen verses in the New Testament. Next, one of the seminarians took an old Bible and a pair of scissors and began the tedious task of cutting out each of the passages they had identified. Everything from the Hebrew tradition of Jubilee in the book of Leviticus, to the Beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount got the axe. The end result was a rather ragged and empty looking Bible. This book became the visual representation of one of the major themes of Wallis' writing and ministry: that a gospel which does not seriously address the biblical themes of money and justice is a gospel full of holes.

I presume one of the passages that would have gotten the cut from that Holey Bible was the passage from Mark Chapter 14 where Jesus comments to his disciples "the poor you will always have with you". As far as predictions go that was a pretty safe one and it has certainly come to bear. Although great strides have been made in the last century to reduce the number of those living in poverty, we know that there are still far too many people with tremendous need in our community and around the world. The pandemic has exacerbated this in many ways.

I think someone else mentioned this in a previous service during this past year, but at times a false analogy has been made that with COVID everyone found themselves in the same boat. I think a more accurate analogy would be to say that with COVID we are all in the same stormy sea, but that some people have battle ships or luxury yachts to ride it out and others only a dingy or homemade raft. As is the case for practically every crisis or disaster, COVID has impacted poor people way more. I was one of the privileged folks who went home from the office on a Friday, and the next week began working from the safety of my home with no interruption in my pay cheque or threat to my job. Millions of people elsewhere in the world were not so fortunate. One update I received recently from World Vision gave the example of a woman named Esther, a married mother of two from Honduras, a country where 60% of the population lives in poverty. Prior to COVID Esther had managed to obtain a small loan and began a business selling fruit. When the pandemic hit and the government restrictions were imposed, she was forced to close her business and had no income to support her family. If you were poor prior to COVID, chances are you are worse off now.

It is also not difficult to find examples of the unfair treatment of workers in our economic system. Those who work in low paying labour intensive, factory or service jobs may need 2 or 3 of them in order to make ends meet and are often exploited. A livable wage, safe working conditions, stable housing, and access to healthy and affordable foods are privileges many do not have.

At the same time we have billionaires building their own personal rocket ships to indulge their fantasies of exploring outer space. It is hard to imagine a more graphic illustration of excess and income inequality. One source I read indicated that from March 18, 2020 to the end of the year, global billionaire wealth increased by \$3.9 trillion. By contrast, global workers' combined earnings fell by \$3.7 trillion, as millions lost their jobs around the world.¹

What about those of us who fall somewhere in between the poor and the ultra-rich? Few people are immune from concerns about money. Eric passed on to me that he saw on the news last week that people stress more about money than work, health and relationships; and that 77% of people fear retirement. The burden of being a provider, of looming mortgage and/or student loans payments, of wondering whether the furnace will make it through another winter, etc., are very real concerns. The liturgical guide we have been using for this series of sermons encourages us to adopt a sacred perspective on our finances: if we earn, save, give, and spend more mindfully, we can find a freer, healthier, and more life-giving way to work with money.

Returning to Jim Wallis, he often describes national budgets as a moral document. Where a government chooses to spend, or not spend, its money is evidence of its values and priorities. I think the same could be applied to individuals or families. It seems like governments these days don't have to pay their bills, but we still do so it is prudent to take care of our obligations. But

¹ <https://inequality.org/facts/global-inequality/>

perhaps I also need to give a more critical eye to whether the things I am expending my money on are in line with God's principles.

The passage about the anointing of Jesus has always been a bit unsettling for me. As a frugal Mennonite, I've always identified with the disciples' reaction. That oil seems like a poor use of resources, surely the money used to buy it could have been put to better use. Is Jesus saying "there is nothing you can do about people being poor, so just go ahead and live your life"? Jim Wallis would say no. As he points out, the context of the story is that they are at a table with Simon the leper, someone who would have been an outcast and disadvantaged. Wallis suggests Jesus is saying "you will always have the poor with you because that is who you are called to serve and spend time with." Maybe Jesus is saying it isn't an either/or proposition, that service to the marginalized can exist alongside other legitimate uses for money. It isn't easy when there are finite resources and choices need to be made, but I think this passage suggests there is grace when we do what we can and with a pure heart.

What I think remains pretty clear is that there is a connection in the scriptures between money and justice that speaks to the times we are in. It was a Google search that led me to the passage from Isaiah. I was not particularly familiar with it but when I read a commentary it became evident quickly that this was an appropriate Scripture text for today's theme.² The commentary describes how the book of Isaiah was written to the residents of Jerusalem during and after their return from exile. By the time we get to the passage in chapter 58 the people are all excited about the task of rebuilding their homeland, but the prophet says "hold on a second". The passage begins with the people attempting to know or find favour with God through fasting. This was an ancient practice, but God says I'm not interested in the same old ritual. The commentary puts it this way:

The prophet interrupts their claims to piety by calling for a series of behaviors we recognize as themes throughout the prophets: to loosen the bonds of injustice, to share what we have with those who have not, to bring the homeless into one's house, to give clothing and shelter to the naked, to reconcile with one's family, to help the afflicted. These are more than one time actions. These are behaviors with broad social consequences, actions that will restructure relationships.

Instead of the traditional fast days, "the fast that I choose," says God, is a whole new way of life. Isaiah reframes fasting as a practice. It is no longer the periodic fast days that serve to punctuate ongoing life. Instead, fasting is a new set of relationships within ongoing life. The fasting acceptable to God is a daily fast from domination, blaming others, evil speech, self-satisfaction, entitlement and blindness to one's privilege. The fast that God seeks calls for vigilance for justice and generosity day in and day out.

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-isaiah-581-9-10-12>

Somewhere in the past year I read or heard someone draw the parallel between the return from exile and what it will be when we emerge from the pandemic. It was so brilliant I was sure it must have been Susanne or Patrick who made the point, but they have both refused credit. Nevertheless, I think the analogy is fitting. As the people returning to Jerusalem rejoiced in coming home and the opportunity to rebuild, so we look forward to a return to a time without the need for masks and fights over vaccine mandates and fear of a dangerous virus.

A common sentiment going back to the very early days of the pandemic is that of a craving for this return to normalcy. I have felt this very much myself. But within that very natural desire, it is important to remember that what was "normal" for many people prior to pandemic involved a daily struggle to make ends meet and structural inequalities that seem insurmountable. Isaiah tells us that as we recover and rebuild post-pandemic, we need to remember those people and to find ways of creating a new normal that links money and justice.

Now this sounds great, but here is where I run out of steam. I feel woefully inadequate to prescribe what kind of actions we as individuals or as NPMC need to take. What I can say with confidence is what we do with our money and how we relate to it and those around us matters to God. Our efforts might involve in part some combination of any number of things:

- participating in service projects, and supporting charities that do amazing work advocating for justice and addressing poverty
- making choices that contribute to a just economy, such as buying local and/or from businesses that support rather than exploit workers
- not getting caught up in the culture of conspicuous consumption, and instead striving for more simplicity
- and advocating for structural changes that can address root issues more comprehensively.

In his sermon on September 26 Patrick encouraged us to be innovative and take risks. May we be open to doing so as we seek ways to help bring justice to our world.

Amen