

## ***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

Invitation to Worship (from Jeremiah )

Woe to those who build their houses by unrighteousness,

**And their upper rooms by injustice.**

Who make their 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.

**“Is this not to know me?” says our God.**

Ancient Witnesses: Deuteronomy 15:1-2, 4-5  
Luke 4:18-19

A number of years ago Paul Krugman, a columnist for the New York Times and economist at Princeton, said that the economic inequality in this country was worse than we may think and that the real economic winners in the rising inequality were 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 40 year span, wage and salary income for those in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile rose about 1% a year, but for the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile it rose 87%, and for the 99.99<sup>th</sup> percentile it rose 495%. This idea that we have a rising oligarchy is not hyperbole.

And 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 for over 35 years. And this growing income gap has only become worse in the past 35 years, not better.

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 CEOs took home roughly 40 times the worker's wage. And by 2007, executives at the largest American companies received about 350

times the pay of the average employee. Today, it is even higher. Meanwhile, if you factor for inflation, wages for those in the lower and middle classes have fallen over the past 35 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—I'll use the word—sinful. I'm not talking about sin the way you hear most preachers talk about it, as individual morality. I'm talking about it as a social condition—a dysfunction in which we all participate 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.

And both for Jesus and throughout 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 and Jewish law dealt with the injustice, 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 regardless of the cause with the idea of "jubilee."

Hebrew scripture scholar, Walter Breuggeman, calls the teaching in Deuteronomy 15 about the jubilee "the most radical teaching in the whole of the Bible." 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 fewer and fewer hands, and people who lost their money and property. 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.” In fact, 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 Lord’s 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 sins as those who have sinned against us.”)

The word, *opheilema*, or “debt,” always is used to specifically signify real *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 reading from Luke is an account of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, his first sermon. 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 the 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 Our God’s favor (jubilee year).*

And then he say, *now* is the time for this to happen! This is radical stuff, and at the end of his sermon, they tried to throw Jesus off a cliff. 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 classic 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 when there was a large gap between the rich and poor, the prosperity was not shared. And this led to economic collapse, followed by a restructuring.

And so the idea of redistribution of wealth is important not just because it is ethically 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.* The prophet, Jeremiah, said that when our ancestors did justice and righteousness, *then* it was well with all of them. Then everyone did 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. The age-old wisdom that a broad distribution of wealth *works* is true. Everyone does better when everyone does better.

Several years ago Robert Reich, former Labor Secretary and who taught at Berkley, wrote

*None of us can thrive in a nation divided between a small number of people receiving an ever larger share of the nation's income and wealth, and everyone else receiving a declining share. The lopsidedness not only diminishes economic growth but also tears at the social fabric of our society. The most fortunate among us who have reached the pinnacles of economic power and success depend on a stable economic and political system. (“Unjust Spoils,” The Nation, June 30, 2010)*

Labor Day is a time for us in the religious community to celebrate working people and their contributions to society, but also to remember the struggles that workers endured to achieve many benefits we have enjoyed and have taken for granted.

In the 1930's the American economy was completely restructured, and workers won victories for Social Security, a 40 hour work week with overtime pay, unemployment insurance, the right to form unions and bargain collectively, vacation days, sick days, minimum wage, health care benefits, pensions, and so forth.

The result was not only that workers were treated more fairly and shared in the economy's gains, but the economy itself became more vibrant. Reich wrote,

*The Great Depression and its aftermath demonstrate that there is one way back to full recovery: through more widely shared prosperity. (“How to End the Great Recession,” The New York Times, September 3, 2010)*

As we now find ourselves in a period of extreme economic inequality, like the one that preceded the total collapse in the 30's, Reich says we need to learn from the past:

*Policies that generate more widely shared prosperity lead to stronger and more sustainable economic growth—and that's good for everyone. The rich are better off with a smaller percentage of a fast-growing economy than a larger share of an economy that is barely moving. That's the Labor Day lesson we learned decades ago...*

Reich's point is that everyone does better—CEO and workers alike—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%.

There's 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 cost a total of \$2.5 trillion by the end of 2010. Then came the tax cuts in 2017 that benefited billionaires and large corporations by \$1.5 trillion. "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. They understand that everyone does better when everyone does better.

Another way to apply the jubilee ethic is to *strengthen labor laws*. Over 20 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." The chart on your bulletin shows the decline of unions is inversely proportional to the rise of income going to the top. And we have seen this spiral continue in the meltdown of 2008 due to deregulation, \$4.6 trillion bailed out Wall Street banks and executives got obscene bonuses, while countless families lost their homes. During the pandemic, the government pumped trillions of dollars to banks and large employers, and the super-wealthy saw huge wealth increases while the workers and the poor lost ground. The gap has continued to grow. Historically, most denominations, including the U.C.C., have been highly supportive of union organizing as labor struggled for a more level playing field and counter the growing power of corporations.

Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at the 1961 AFL-CIO convention, saying,

*The labor movement did not diminish the strength of the nation but enlarged it. By raising the living standards of millions, labor miraculously created a market for industry and lifted the whole nation to undreamed of levels of production. Those who today attack labor forget these simple truths, but history remembers them.*

In a recent book called *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*, the authors say that the more equal the society, 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 entire 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.

Everyone does better when everyone does better!

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*