

Fourth Sunday in Lent

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John 12:1-8

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Transforming Jericho Road

During Lent, we're looking at the temptations Jesus faced that set up his ministry as a confrontation to power and empire. I suggested when we began this series that we might consider the character of Satan, and certainly the temptations that Satan placed before Jesus, as proxies for what we'll call empire and the temptations we face as citizens of empire.

The most helpful definition I've come across of "empire" in this context is offered by theologian Joerg Rieger, who writes: "Empire describes "the massive concentrations of power

that permeate all aspects of life and that cannot be controlled by any one actor alone ... Empire seeks to extend its control as far as possible; not only geographically, politically, and economically ... but also intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, culturally, and religiously" (Rieger, *Christ and Empire*, 2-3).

The first temptation Jesus faced in the desert, at least in Luke's account that we've been using to guide these conversations, is to turn stones into bread. At the simplest level, it's a temptation for Jesus to feed his

own hunger. He's been fasting for 40 days, so here, give yourself something to eat. But imagine what else could be done by turning stones to bread. Jesus could feed not only himself, but the whole world...everyone who is hungry. Last week we talked about the danger of looking to wealth as a savior...the temptation here is to make enough bread to feed everyone and let Jesus handle it.

But Jesus rejected that temptation. Not because he wants people to go hungry, but because Jesus is not Machiavelli—the ends do not justify the means. This morning, I invite us to consider a little closer how Jesus' rejection of turning stones to bread, along with another text about poverty and hunger, have been used, and I believe misrepresented, by empire to maintain a poverty class.

I cannot count the num-

ber of times, whenever I have tried to talk about systemic poverty in the church, that someone has responded by quoting John 12:8 that we heard this morning.

"The poor will always be with you." On the surface, it seems to be a biblical justification for poverty. Here is Jesus stating that poverty is inevitable and can never be ended. The verse is used to offload social responsibility for developing programs that can end poverty and excuse our national piecemeal approach of providing food where we are able without ever questioning or addressing the question of why that assistance continues to be needed.

In our culture, we have added an even more insidious biblical interpretation by suggesting that not only is poverty inevitable, but it's a result, a punishment, for personal sin. Good people

are rewarded with wealth. Sinners are punished with poverty and must then rely on the benevolence of those with resources who made better, less sinful, choices in life.

So let's look first at the text we heard this morning. John 12:8 is one of those texts used to justify poverty in the same way that passages like Ephesians and Colossians texts that remind slaves to obey their earthly masters were used for centuries in this country to justify slavery.

It's worth noting that scholars as early as a century ago, like Rudolph Bultmann, along with contemporary scholars in the Jesus seminar, do not believe this quote is reliably attributable to Jesus in the first place. But whether or not Jesus said it, we have it in the Bible, and we have centuries of interpretation that declare

poverty as a biblical inevitability.

So let's consider the context of this story. Jesus is, himself, poor. As are most of his followers. They are described as being homeless and depending on others for food. The early Christian movements in the first few centuries also overwhelmingly attracted the poor along with the politically subjugated.

This story also takes place shortly before Jesus' crucifixion. Mary anoints Jesus' feet, and Judas, the one who raises the objection, is noted to have been skimming from the common purse before he betrays Jesus. So selling the oil to give money to the poor was really an excuse for Judas to pad his own pocket, according to John's telling.

So we have a person, Jesus, who is himself poor, living with a community of those who are poor, re-

sponding to someone, Judas, who takes advantage of the poor for his own personal gain. And Jesus responds to Judas' criticism by quoting Deuteronomy 15:11. But Deuteronomy 15 turns out to be one of the most liberating Jubilee texts from the entire Hebrew Bible.

That chapter ends with stating that that because so many people are poor, it is everyone's duty to God to "open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor." While Jesus' statement in John cuts out the rest of the chapter in Deuteronomy, he's making a reference to a text that you can bet everyone around him, especially the poor, knew by heart. It's a text commanding the regular redistribution of society's wealth in order to meet the needs of the poor.

So Jesus quoting a Jubilee passage reminds everyone there that the reason that

there are poor people is not because of God's will, but because of humanity's greed and disobedience to God's command. In this exchange, the statement that "there will never cease to be some in need on the earth" or "the poor you always have with you" is not said to justify inactivity and apathy toward the poor, but to call out poverty as an affront to God's command of Jubilee in Deuteronomy.

As you may recall, the main theme of many of Jesus' teachings and his ministry in general is caring for the poor and ending poverty. Jim Wallis, who you may know from the Sojourner's organization, and who now teaches at Georgetown, notes that one in every four stories in the Bible are about poverty. That's way more stories about economic justice than we have stories about issues like marriage or

sexuality, by the way.

According to the CDC, we live in a country where over 31 million Americans under 65, over 11% of that population, and more than 1 in 20 children under 18, have no health insurance. One-hundred-million people, almost a third of the population, live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. That's a household income of less than \$46,000 for a family of four. While that 100 million includes those over 65 and under 25, over 12-million of those are working full-time jobs and still live in poverty. And those numbers are overwhelmingly skewed toward people of color.

If those numbers aren't troubling enough, consider that 20% of homeless persons in our country and children under 18, and 42% of those children identify as LGBTQ, meaning poverty

and homelessness disproportionately affects that population as well. All of those statistics, which were the latest I could find, were from 2020, using data ending in 2019. Which means they reflect the reality before COVID hit. Most reports suggest those trends have worsened in the past two years.

Hearing or reading numbers like that feel, to me, overwhelming. We attended a meeting a few days ago for the parents of rising freshmen at Science Hill High School, because Wallace will be starting there in the fall. It's a freshman class of 600 people. I know those numbers I shared disproportionately affect some areas of the country more than others, but on the average, that means around 200 of those kids starting high school with Wallace in the fall may live in homes where

it's a struggle to pay for both housing and food every month, where fees for sports or school trips may not fit in the family budget, and where missing even a single paycheck or experiencing a medical crisis could mean the loss of a home.

But in a country as wealthy as ours, we can do better. In the United States, we throw away 46 million pounds of food each year when it's estimated that 4 million pounds of food would feed everyone. There are an estimated 10 million homeless people in the US (3.125%), and simultaneously there are more than 12 million empty luxury housing units. Finland (<0.1%), Japan (<0.0003%), and Singapore (<0.017%) have all enacted programs--some government and some NGO--to permanently house the homeless in vacant homes and have reduced the

homeless population to less than 1/100th of a percent of the population.

Of course virtually every other developed country in the world has some form of universal healthcare that insures access to necessary medical services protecting people from being forced into homelessness from an unexpected medical crisis while also raising the longevity and overall health of the entire population.

These countries still have robust economies, foster innovation, and somehow manage to avoid turning into a "Marxist-socialist hellscape" as several of our esteemed lawmakers have worried we would become should we enact measures to combat systemic poverty. I know we don't get to make those laws, and we have seen how utterly destructive it can be when religious folks lust after power at all costs

with the goal of enacting laws that further advance their own religious beliefs.

But we need to understand that poverty is not an inevitability, and that it is not endorsed or upheld by Jesus as such. God's commandment, reinforced by Jesus, is for Jubilee, a means of redistributing accumulated wealth on a large scale in a way that alleviates poverty for the largest number of people.

I'm not making that up. It's right here in the Bible! I'll end by inviting us to consider a quote from Martin Luther King Jr., who wrote that, "A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must

come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

Let's continue to play Good Samaritan whenever we can, but realize that our goal is not to continue casting coins, but to restructure the edifice that creates and systematizes poverty in the first place. Amen.

