

Downward Mobility in an Upscale World

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Not long ago, I sat and talked with some very wealthy Christians about what it means to be the church and to follow Jesus. One business man confided, "I, too, have been thinking about following Christ and what it means. So I had this made." He pulled up his shirt sleeve to reveal a bracelet, engraved with W.W.J.D. (What Would Jesus Do?). It was custom-made of 24 karat gold.

Maybe each of us can relate to this man - both in his earnest desire to follow Jesus and his distorted execution of that desire, so bound up in the materialism of our culture. It is difficult to learn to live the downward mobility of the gospel in this age of wealth. For the most part, those of us who are rich never meet those of us who are poor. Instead, non-profit organizations serve as brokers between the two in a booming business of poverty management.

I believe that the great tragedy of the church is not that rich Christians do not care about the poor, but that they do not know the poor. Yet if we are called to live the new community for which Christ was crucified, we cannot remain strangers to one another. Jesus demands that we live in a very different way.

I recently surveyed people who said they were "strong followers" of Jesus." Over 80 percent agreed with the statement, "Jesus spent much time with the poor." Yet only 1 percent said that they themselves spent time with the poor. We believe that we are following the God of the poor - yet we never truly encounter the poor.

About five years ago, I became a part of a community called the Simple Way, a group of Christians literally born out of the wreckage of the church. Dozens of homeless families and children had moved into St. Edward's, a cavernous, abandoned Catholic church in one of the most struggling neighbourhoods of Philadelphia. A small group of us who were students at Eastern College, a suburban Christian school, decided to move in with them as a gesture of solidarity. From that initial step, one miracle followed another as those families mentored us in community, worship, and love.

Eventually, we settled in a row-house in Kensington, a few blocks from St. Edward's. It is the poorest (but most beautiful!) district in Pennsylvania. There is no place we'd rather call home. Here, we play and dance. We plant gardens. We feed people. We cry. We have a community store. We help kids with homework. We live, and we spend our lives joining folks in poverty as they struggle to end it. Because we know that we cannot end poverty without ending wealth, we also spend time talking with Christian communities about our work and hosting visitors.

Before moving to St. Edward's and then Kensington, I had worked in Calcutta, India, first at Mother Teresa's home for the destitute dying and then in a leper colony. A week after returning to the United States, I began a year at Willow Creek Community Church, one of the largest, wealthiest congregations in the world - where a food court graces their worship centre. Talk about culture shock!

This contrast brought me face to face with Christ's radical love, a love strong enough to bring us together across chasms of difference. I longed for the two worlds to meet, for the lepers to know the landowners. I committed my life to trying to make that a reality.

Over the years I have come to see how charity fits into - and legitimizes - our system of wealth and poverty. Charity assures that the rich will feel good while the poor will remain with us. It is important that the poor remain with us, because our capitalist system hinges on it. Without someone on the bottom, there is no American Dream and no hope for upward mobility. Charity also functions to keep the wealthy sane. Tithes, tax-exempt donations, and short-term mission trips, while they accomplish some good, also function as outlets that allow wealthy Christians to pay off their consciences while avoiding a revolution of lifestyle. People do their time

in a social program or distribute food and clothes through organizations which take their excess. That way, they never actually have to face the poor and give their clothes, their food, their beds. Wealthy Christians never actually have to be with poor people, with Christ in disguise.

If charity did not provide these carefully sanctioned outlets, Christians might be forced to live the reckless Gospel of Jesus by abandoning the stuff of earth. Instead, thanks to charity, we can live out a comfortable, privatized discipleship.

But when we get to heaven and are separated into sheep and goats (Matt. 25), I don't believe Jesus is going to say, "When I was hungry, you gave a check to the United Way and they fed me" or "When I was naked, you donated to the Salvation Army and they clothed me." Jesus is not seeking distant acts of charity. He is seeking concrete actions: "You fed me. You visited me. You welcomed me in. you clothed me,"

If we are to truly be the church, poverty must be a face we recognize as our own kin.

Several years ago, I attended a protest against sweatshops where the organizers had not invited the typical rally speakers - lawyers, activists, advocates. Instead, they brought kids from the sweatshops. A child from Indonesia pointed to his face. "I got this scar when my master lashed me for not working hard enough. When it bled, he did not want me to stop working or to ruin the cloth, so he took a lighter and burned it shut. I got this scar making stuff for you."

I was suddenly consumed with the overwhelming reality of the suffering body of Christ. Jesus now bore not just nail marks and scars from thorns, but a gash down his face. How could I possibly follow Jesus and buy anything from that master?

If we are content with discipleship that ends merely with generosity, we still serve money. Generosity is a beautiful response, but we should not confuse it with love. Generosity is merely what is expected; what is required is to return that which has been stolen. God did not create some of us rich and others of us poor.

Basil the Great, writing in the fourth century, put it this way: "When someone strips a man of his clothes, we call him a thief. And one who might clothe the naked and does not - should not he be given the same name? The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry; the coat in your wardrobe belongs to the naked; the shoes you let rot belong to the barefoot; the money in your vaults belongs to the destitute." Or, in the words of Dorothy Day, "If you have two coats, one of them belongs to the poor." Should we not, then, return our stolen goods with humility, like a child returning a stolen candy bar to the grocery store clerk? Should we not cry out, in the words of St. Vincent de Paul: "May the poor man forgive me the bread I give him"?

Often wealthy folks ask me what they can do for the simple way. I could ask them for a few thousand dollars, but that would be too easy for both of us. Instead, I ask them to come visit. Writing a check makes us feel good and can fool us into thinking that we have loved the poor. But seeing the squat houses and tent cities and hungry children will wreck our lives. We will never again be the same.

As we have done this work and have accompanied others new to it, we've come to see a pattern. People join us with the idea of "saving the poor." Later, they say instead that "the poor saved me." But both comments have one thing in common. They revolve around me - what I have to give poor people and what they can give me. God wants us to move beyond ourselves to join all of creation in groaning for liberation. There we face, perhaps for the first time, the reality that we, too, are poor.

I believe the church has forgotten its identity. The church is not an institution, a meeting, or a building. It is not something we go to. The church is something we are - an organism, not an organization.

Instead of living out this alternative vision, the church has been content to be a broker between the rich and poor. Both those trapped in poverty and those trapped in riches view the church as a distribution centre, a place where the poor come to get stuff and the rich come to dump stuff. No radical new community is formed.

In this model, both go away satisfied (the rich feel good, the poor get fed) - but neither goes away transformed. They do not join together to discover a new way of living.

In ministering this way, the church has adopted the model of many of our non-profit organizations. Functionally, many nonprofits act as brokers between the rich and the poor. They facilitate the exchange of goods and services, putting plenty of professionals in the middle to guarantee that the rich do not have to face the poor and that power does not shift. Rich and poor are kept in separate worlds. Charity does not feed fundamental change.

Brokering poverty also seduces Christians into being gatekeepers to power. Our progressive movements are haunted by the temptation to facilitate power. If anything, the recent dismantling of the welfare system and the corresponding public praise of small attempts by churches, nonprofits and other faith-based institutions to take up the slack has increased this pressure. Policies like charitable choice (where churches compete for federal funding to run social programs) allow our government to pat churches on the back: "You do a better job at managing poverty than we do, so we'll just discontinue our social supports and let you do the job!" And our churches, flattered and uncritical, scramble for the new state money like a prize.

In that model, the power structure has not budged. The power has merely changed hands. But power does not trickle-down. Just as trickle-down economics has failed, trickle-down politics does not bring change.

Many beautiful Christians working for social change in a range of movements believe we can bring about fundamental change by using power benevolently rather than reworking the power equation. We see ourselves as the good guys who will use our influence for justice - and perhaps, in these terms, we succeed in getting our candidate on the ballot or elected. But the Christ we follow has a different, harder path - one of downward mobility, of struggling to become the least, of joining those at the bottom.

Several years ago, I was at a meeting where a new movement to end poverty was announced. I looked around. The only poor people in sight were the handful of people I had come with. Launching a movement to end poverty without poor people in critical roles is like launching a civil rights movement without black people, or a feminist movement without women. As long as the poor are not present and intricately involved in the process, ending poverty will remain an intellectual, political concept. It will not convert us.

The church needs to stop talking about ending the pain of the poor and instead join the poor. All around us, the poor are crying out. They can no longer be silenced. Wherever that outcry is heard, the church must be present.

All this does not mean that social service organizations do not do a great deal of good. I am not calling for all these organizations to be dismantled. But I am calling Christians to ask critical questions about their relationship to God's poor people.

I believe all our "programs" should have their genesis in true relationship. At our house, we tutor - but we did not start by deciding to do a tutoring program. We simply fell in love with the kids who needed help with their homework. We feed people - but we did not begin with a decision to start a feeding program. We simply fell in love with our neighbours, and they were hungry.

We have now established a non-profit organisation ourselves, but we did this in order for the organisation to serve us. We are not committed to the organisation, but rather to our fellowship

together.

I see many communities doing amazing things through established organisations. God can - and does - work through these organisations. But the reign of God dwells in people.

Those of us who yearn for the kingdom of God must follow in the steps of Jesus. Jesus was not "in charge" of the poor. He was poor. The message of Christ from the manger to the cross is that the world is conquered through weakness, through least-ness, through struggle - not from the top, but from the bottom.

The people wanted a mighty Messiah. They got a baby refugee. They wanted a powerful king to take over Rome. They got a wandering homeless man. He could have saved the world with his mighty power, but he did it through his ridiculous love. The power of God lies in the brokenness of Jesus: naked, cursed, spit upon, with birds picking at his flesh as he died the rotten death of a criminal.

The great temptation of the church, and of every believer, is the offer Satan made to Jesus in the desert: to win the world with power. But power will not end poverty. We must discover another way of living.

Jesus did not set up a program, but rather modelled a way of living that incarnated the reign of God. That reign did not spread through organizational establishments or structural systems. It spread through touch, through breath, through life. It spread through people who discovered love.

I am haunted by the command of Jesus to love our neighbour as ourselves. I struggle because I sleep in a house while my neighbour sleeps in a cardboard box; I eat twice a day while my neighbour hasn't eaten once. I draw strength from following Jesus in community. I live with people who, if they pass someone with a worse pair of shoes, have taken their shoes off and switched; people who have quietly handed over winter jackets to someone they met on the street without a coat.

This is the reckless love of Jesus, which teaches us to see the connections between our wealth and our neighbour's poverty. The love of Jesus will teach us another way of doing life, a way that will bring God's reign to earth as it is in heaven. The reign of God is not for the future. It is something we live today.

Jesus reminds us that it is easy to love people who are just like us: "Even idolaters do that" (Matt. 5:47). We are called to love those who hate us. Love those who create poverty, and love those who are trapped in it. See each of them in yourself - the same blood and tears. We are all capable of the same evil, and we have potential for the same good. As one believer said, "In the oppressed I recognize my own face, and in the hands of the oppressor I recognize my own hands." From addicts I learn of my addiction, and from the saints I learn of my holiness.

The God of love and the love of God know no bounds. The unending love of Jesus teaches revolutionaries to love police officers, anarchists to love politicians, vegetarians to love meat-eaters, peacemakers to love soldiers. This is the love that makes us the church.

Ultimately, only this radical love of Jesus can end the poverty-wealth dichotomy. When the rich meet the poor, together they will end wealth. When the poor meet the rich, together they will end poverty.

People do not get crucified for charity. **People are crucified for living out a love that disrupts the social order; that calls forth a new world. People are not crucified for helping poor people. People are crucified for joining them.**

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