

## EAT, PRAY, LOVE . . . LIKE GOD

What's the gospel word on global wealth?

*Luke 16:19-31; 1 John 4:19-21; Isaiah 58:1-9a; Psalm 146:5-10*

Today begins a 10-part worship series asking a question,

“What's the gospel word?”

We'll ask that question about such diverse, and relevant, topics as

“What's the gospel word on global wealth and poverty?

on Christian-Muslim relations?

on peace and warfare?

on pornographic culture?

on marriage?

on environmental threats?

on monasticism?

on sports?

on immigration?

on Sabbath economics?”

And no, we're not being presumptuous

by suggesting there *is* such a thing as

a Gospel Word on these often divisive,

and highly politicized, issues in our culture.

As to whether there is *one* “Christian position” on these issues,

I will *not* be issuing any authoritative declarations,

as if I had that authority.

As to whether there is *one* political solution,

that deserves to be labeled “Christian”

I won't even *begin* to claim knowledge of *that*.

But I *will* be bold enough to declare *this*:

“The Gospel of Jesus Christ *does speak*.”

The Gospel is *not* silent.

It has a word, or words, to share.

And it is our task, as the people of God,

the people who claim to follow Jesus in life,

to work together to discern those words,

in reverent examination of the scriptures,

in expectation that the Holy Spirit will speak,

and in mutual covenant with our church community.

The Gospel of Jesus speaks to the pressing issues of our day,

and it is our lifelong task as *disciples* of Jesus,

as cultural and social realities shift around us,

to *keep* asking the question,

“What's the gospel word?”

and to *keep* listening with humility.

So during this whole series I want to challenge us as a congregation:

Keep listening for the gospel word . . . *after* you leave this space,

and engage in the everyday life of the church,

as you converse with your companions in faith,

in Sunday School and small groups,

in breakfast or lunch groups,

with family and friends at home.

Keep listening, and keep asking, over and over,

“So what does the Gospel say *here* . . . in *this* place and time?”

and, “what does the Gospel say *now* . . .

given these particular realities?”

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So let's jump right into the first question,

“What's the gospel word on global wealth?”

or more *accurately*,

“What's the gospel word on global wealth and poverty?”

It's good to start here because this is the one about which scripture has *the most* to say, of any topic in this series.

Out of hundreds of possible passages

we chose the few you heard this morning.

Let me just point out the obvious, in each one.

Psalm 146 declares the essential nature and character of the Lord,

Yahweh:

Yahweh created the whole heaven and earth.

and is loyal to what he created, *forever*.

Yahweh executes justice for the oppressed,

gives food to the hungry,

sets the prisoner free,

opens the eyes of the blind,

lifts up those who are bowed down.

If that doesn't convince you,  
just read the rest of the psalms, *and* the prophets.  
Over and over and over we get the message: God's favors the poor.  
God has *special* regard for those who are bowed down,  
who get crushed by other people, or by human systems.  
Does God love *everybody*? rich and poor? Yes, *absolutely*!!  
But does God play *favorites*? Yes, *again. Absolutely!*  
*In the sense* that God bestows special favor on the poor,  
because the rest of creation *doesn't*.  
God's heart of compassion opens *especially* wide,  
for those who are oppressed, or in bondage.  
We cannot read scripture and deny God's priority toward the poor.

But does that apply to *us*?  
What is *our* responsibility for the poor,  
which, as Jesus said, we will always have with us?

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Did you hear Isaiah this morning?  
God says in Isaiah 58,  
Do you want my attention?  
Do you want my approval?  
Don't come to me with all your sacrifices,  
and all your holy fast days,  
while you oppress your labor force (v. 3),  
while you put your own interests  
above the needs of others around you.  
Your fasting won't even cause a blip on my radar  
(v. 4, literally, "will not make your voice heard on high").

Yahweh goes on,  
"I'll tell you what kind of fast gets *my* attention:  
loose the bonds of injustice,  
undo the thongs of the yoke,  
let the oppressed go free,  
break every yoke,  
share your bread with the hungry,  
bring the homeless poor into your house,  
when you see the naked, cover them."

Then when you call me, I'll say, "Yes, I *hear* you."  
When you cry for help, I'll say, "*Here* I am."

Could we find any clearer mandate than this?  
God's priority is toward the poor, the hungry, the oppressed.  
And if *our* posture is not pointed the same direction,  
we cut ourselves off from God,  
we move *ourselves* off God's radar.

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Then the gospel story today was from Luke 16.  
One of Jesus' parables: the rich man and Lazarus.  
Jesus takes these prophetic and poetic words we just heard  
from the Old Testament,  
and tells us a compelling story to illustrate them.  
So a rich man had the finest of clothes,  
and the most sumptuous food, every day,  
while *outside* his gate,  
in other words, outside of his realm of responsibility,  
lay a poor man, hungry, destitute, diseased.  
The poor man, named Lazarus, died eventually,  
and was carried away to heaven to be with Abraham.  
The rich man died, too,  
and found himself tormented in Hades.  
Tormented *especially* by his ability to see into heaven,  
and notice this poor man, for the *first* time,  
lounging around with Abraham.  
So he asked Abraham to send Lazarus to him,  
to comfort him with a few drops of water.  
Of course, the chasm was too great.  
It could not be crossed in death.  
In life, he could have crossed the chasm between rich and poor,  
but he *didn't*.  
When the rich man asks Abraham to at *least* send Lazarus  
back to his house and warn those who have not yet died.  
Abraham's response—  
they have already *heard* the voice of Moses and the prophets—  
but they didn't listen.  
Why would they listen to *this* man?

In other words, Jesus said,  
listen to the scriptures.  
They are perfectly clear.  
Show your compassion to the poor, just as God does.

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And finally, the first epistle of John, chapter 4,  
put it rather bluntly this morning:  
“We love because God loves.  
If you say, ‘I love God,’  
but don’t show love to your fellow human beings,  
you lie.”  
If you don’t love like God loves,  
your faith is a sham.

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I haven’t yet read the book, or seen the movie,  
“Eat, pray, love.”  
But I’ve heard the gist of the storyline.  
It’s about a woman who is on a quest of self-discovery,  
after a painful divorce.  
So she travels the world in search of herself,  
and finds what she’s looking for  
in wonderful food in Italy,  
in spiritual experiences in India,  
and in falling in love in Bali.  
I’m sure, on various levels,  
this story has plenty to commend it,  
and I’ll probably see it someday.

But if you’ll allow me the grace  
to criticize something I know nothing about,  
I would make this one observation,  
from a Judeo-Christian theological framework.  
That kind of journey,  
is the kind that doesn’t make a blip on God’s radar.  
It’s a lot more about pursuing self-interest,  
than aligning ourselves with God’s interests.  
Eating well, if we want God to notice and approve,

involves sharing our food with the poor.  
Praying well, if we expect God to hear,  
is not going deeper into ourselves.  
We don’t do contemplation  
for the sake of contemplating.  
If contemplation does not lead to action,  
does not lead to solidarity with those crushed by life,  
it will also *never* lead us to the God of the Bible.  
And loving well, is *far* more than finding the one and only soul-mate  
who will meet all my needs forever.  
Love that gets God’s attention,  
is love that does the hard work  
of learning to love who and what *God* loves.  
And we have already *established*  
who holds a special place in God’s heart—the poor.

The challenge before us is to eat, pray, and love . . . *like God*,  
to align our priorities with God’s priorities.

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So let’s talk about what we face in today’s global economy.  
What does God think about the globalization of wealth?  
What does God think about the state of affairs  
in terms of the gap between the rich and poor?  
Is there a gospel word that speaks to global economics?

Well, let’s just take a look at some raw facts.  
Prepare to be disturbed.

According to the United Nations, and UNICEF,  
and other world organizations,  
tomorrow morning’s newspaper could run this headline:  
“Yesterday over 25,000 People Perished from Extreme Poverty.”  
But I can assure you, the paper won’t mention it tomorrow.  
Because it would have to run the *same* headline the *next* day.  
And the next.  
Seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, 25,000 people.  
The loss of human life from poverty in our world,  
is like the earthquake that happened in Haiti earlier this year,

happening every 9-10 days.  
It's like the Asian tsunami that happened in Christmas 2004,  
occurring every 10-11 days.  
This imaginary newspaper article could go on, saying,  
*Yesterday*, 8,000 children died of malaria,  
5,000 adults died of tuberculosis,  
nearly 8,000 young adults died of AIDS,  
and many thousands died of diarrhea and pneumonia,  
and other treatable diseases that prey on bodies  
that are weakened from chronic hunger.  
These deaths occurred quietly  
in some of the poorest villages on earth,  
in hospital wards without enough antibiotics,  
in homes that had no \$6 mosquito nets,  
in towns without a safe water supply.  
They died without their names being mentioned,  
and without any public comment.

A deranged gunman kills 5 or 6 precious human lives,  
and, *understandably*, the news wires run hot,  
and it goes global *instantly*.  
But no mention of the 25,000 who died that day from poverty.

It's perfectly *understandable*.  
It's called compassion fatigue.  
To take in the same, overwhelmingly bad news,  
every day,  
news that won't change anytime soon,  
would wear us out emotionally.  
But it's helpful now and again to remind ourselves of it.  
And ask, what does *God* think about it?  
The God of our Bible does *not* suffer from compassion fatigue.  
God's heart is big enough  
to grieve every time one human being,  
that God created in God's image,  
has a life snuffed out,  
because the rest of the world had their back turned.

I can't say much about global economics,  
because that's not my expertise or calling.  
I only know *my* calling is to proclaim what we all should know about  
the rule and reign of God,  
and about God's mission and agenda.

But from what I read, and understand,  
absolute equality of all resources  
is *not* what needs to happen.  
It's a valid argument to say that *some* inequality  
is necessary in a system that also values human freedom.  
Because reasonable inequality helps keep us innovative,  
helps push us toward higher education,  
encourages us to be more productive.

Absolute equality in every sphere is not the concern of the biblical story.  
But you *better believe* that a *central concern* of the Bible is,  
in fact, justice for the poor and oppressed.  
People of faith had better be *deeply* concerned,  
when the inequalities in our world get excessive,  
to the point that the poor are dehumanized,  
ignored,  
shoved to the back of our collective awareness and concern.  
Christian ethics *demand*s that we look at every human being  
as a reflection of the image of God,  
who are endowed by God with human dignity.  
Whether they live in sub-Saharan Africa,  
or the mountains of Pakistan,  
or in the slums of New York.

Inequality *becomes* immoral  
when it obstructs at least some persons from realizing  
their God-given human dignity within their own communities.  
And that is what's happening now,  
all over our world.

For anyone who *pretends* to read and respect the Bible *at all*,  
disregard for the poor, or even ignorance about the poor,  
are *not options*.

They are immoral, and sinful in God's eyes.

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Now there are Christian economists who have different views  
on *how* the global gap between the rich and the poor are addressed.  
That's fine. Let the debate continue.

But let there be no debate about this gospel word:

“God loves the poor, and wants them to be poor no longer.”

No matter *what* economic system you tout—  
capitalism, socialism, or some hybrid of the two—  
if you are Christian,  
it had better meet this gospel standard:  
that the poor are being lifted up *out* of poverty,  
that *fewer* people are going to bed hungry,  
that the massive death statistics are going down.

We are humanly prone to be self-oriented  
when it comes to economics—either global or personal.  
There will be times when we have to make a choice  
between our gospel-oriented moral goals,  
and our self-oriented economic goals.

Doing what is right will *not necessarily* mean,  
we always do what boosts the bottom line of our businesses,  
that we choose our stock portfolio based  
on what fund will be most profitable for us,  
or that we always buy our food and clothing  
at the cheapest available price.

Asking where things come from,  
and how that impacts the human dignity of the poor,  
is a question we absolutely *need* to be asking, and *often*.

Asking what our money does after it leaves our hands,  
*is* a moral and theological question

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I have been deeply challenged this week in my own life,  
as I prepared for this sermon.  
And there is a lot more I wish I had time to talk about, but I don't.

There's a church I know about whose pastor takes  
whatever he *wished* he had time to include in his sermon,  
and gives it to his congregation afterward—  
additional notes and quotes and stories and resources.  
I'm inclined to do that this Sunday,  
and maybe some other Sundays in this series.  
So if you're on our church email list,  
expect an email from me in the next day or two.  
And if you *don't* have email,  
I'll put it on a handout, available next Sunday.

That might be a reminder to make this, and *every* Sunday,  
a continuing conversation.  
I don't *want* my sermons to end, when *I* end them.  
I want them to be catalysts for further discernment.  
So please, let's keep talking together,  
and listening together,  
for the Gospel Word.  
The Gospel *does* speak.

I invite us now to respond by opening your bulletin  
to the new hymn printed there.  
We're borrowing from a worship resource for this series,  
that typically includes a hymn written for the occasion,  
so we might be singing a number of new hymns in coming weeks.  
This one is a response to the story Jesus told  
about the rich man and Lazarus.  
It's mostly a confession . . . “If only . . .”  
So in a spirit of confession,  
let us read this text together in silence and prayerful thought.  
Then we'll sing it.

—Phil Kniss, September 5, 2010