

Thomas R. Cook  
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 9, 2018

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## “The Biblical Admonition to Care for People in Poverty”

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Scripture: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; 16 Pentecost B (Proper 18B)

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So, I can't seem to turn my attention away from the Proverbs this morning, the verses that seemingly extoll the virtues of those who live in poverty? What is it about “the poor” that is so special? I mean, isn't it the poor who demand an inordinate amount of public support and drain the nation's coffers? Isn't it the poor who overwhelm our emergency rooms and flood our medical system with indigent demands while thrusting ever upward the cost of health care for all? Surely a majority of those who fill our prisons are disciples of poverty now incarcerated and living off the public dole. Homeless people wander the streets, accosting passers-by for a handout, sleeping in public places or automobiles, maybe turning to crime, petty or great, to make a living. Why is it a blessing for us to share our bread with such as these? Why does the Bible seem to protect them, even honor them, while casting threats about injustice, calamity, and the despoiling of life at those who are not poor?

Well, I suppose the answer, at least the beginning of an answer, lies couched within these very verses we heard this morning: “The rich and the poor have this in

common,” says the Holy Scripture, “the Lord is the maker of them all.”

It *is* true. As different as we all may be, it is clear that we arise from the same source. Human beings are different by experience and culture and knowledge, but we are no different in our make-up, our DNA, so to speak, our nature as creatures, or our needs for food, shelter, security, and love as human beings. We all derive from the same history, come from the same earth, live by the same maker. Yet our experiences are so vastly dissimilar. For many people, a constant, daily reality is the lack of access to a sound basic education in an environment suitable for learning surrounded by supportive families and security and necessary resources. Our nation’s continuing sordid affair with drug and substance abuse robs many persons of the ability to ever stand on their own feet and make a decent living. Public services for mentally ill and physically handicapped indigent persons dry up as debates over “affordable” health care proliferate. Some people can work multiple jobs and yet not afford a home for their families, and the wait for public assistance can be long and arduous and fraught with bureaucracy. And crime, I think, continues to be treated as a cause of our troubles rather than as a symptom of a deeply insecure, unbalanced culture and economy.

What is so special about the poor? Why the biblical imperative to guard them, to be concerned for their welfare and for justice? I suppose at its root is an

understanding that “they” really are... “we.” The poor are people; those not poor are people; the Lord is maker of us all. The Scriptures work from a principal understanding that the lack of opportunity, the unbalanced distribution of wealth throughout society, the despair and the crime and the homelessness and the apathy are morally and inextricably linked to the systems by which we govern ourselves, the ways we live together. In other words, the poor don’t just happen; poverty is constructed, and our brothers and our sisters sometimes wallow in it. It is from this reality that the Scriptures construct their theology of the poor, of God’s care for the disenfranchised, the weak, the broken, the prisoner. It isn’t a lack of accountability for our personal actions that the Scriptures promote; rather, it is the concern for justice, for fair access to a decent living. The Bible recognizes that one reason we have the poor is that we also have the wealthy, and in the game of governance, it is always the latter who have the upper hand. Hence the admonition, “Do not rob the poor because they are poor.” Do not take more from those who have little just because we can.

Now I know that many purport the idea that religion and politics don’t mix. And while I sympathize with the idea, I am afraid it cannot apply entirely to the Christian faith. I conducted just a quick word search of the Bible, and it revealed nearly two hundred (194) passages extolling or involving the practice of justice, over 170 dealing with the alleviation of poverty or help and justice for “the poor.” See,

the Bible doesn't condemn the wealthy for having wealth. It recognizes the imbalances in life, and reminds us that it's what we choose to do with wealth that matters... it's about justice. It's about fairness and reasonableness toward one another. Concern for the well-being of others. A decent turn for all people. A system that doesn't favor wealth over poverty or forget that the two are linked, and that all the people involved are of the Lord's making. And we aren't simply speaking of charity here: the feeding of the hungry, the sheltering of homeless people, philanthropy for the poor, which are all good and decent response to address the needs of so many people. But charity, while valuable, is only part of the equation. It addresses the immediate needs of the poor, but it doesn't change the reasons for the poor. The prophet doesn't say "Let charity roll down like mighty waters...", rather "Let *justice* roll down like mighty waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream (Amos 5:24)." I am often so utterly convicted by the words of William Sloane Coffin, late minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, and on this topic of justice and poverty, there is no exception. Coffin says:

*"Few of us today are troubled by the way our economy flourishes not by providing necessities but by providing luxuries, and by the national goal of ending welfare as we know it, when a more just goal would be ending poverty as we know it. We Christians mean well --- feebly. We may be repelled by materialism, but we are caught up in it. We are troubled by widespread poverty, but we overly esteem wealth."*

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<sup>1</sup> Coffin, William Sloane, *Credo* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 54.

From the Proverbs: “Those who are generous are blessed, because they share their bread with the poor.” “Do not rob the poor because they are poor.” These are the values by which we are called to live. To concern ourselves not only with the immediate well-being of poor human beings but with the way society perceives and treats them --- this is our ministry. In 1937 Franklin Roosevelt made the following too little remembered comment on the American life. It is not original in its principle, but it comes from a deeply American experience of living together. He said:

*“The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.”<sup>2</sup>*

A return to this sentiment, and the sentiment expressed in the Proverbs this morning, could, I believe, better shape the debates of our times regarding health care and economic growth and education and concern for one another. Are we spending too much money fighting the enemy who can kill the body while forgetting the enemies of poverty and despair and inequality and injustice that are tearing out our souls even now? Should not the ideals of Holy Scripture like those expressed in Proverbs influence the way we listen, the way we vote, the way we spend or give our money, the way we perceive the poor in our midst? Should not our society be more justly based upon the idea of “enough” rather than on excess? I believe so.

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<sup>2</sup> Roosevelt, Franklin D., Second Inaugural Address delivered January 20, 1937, Washington, D.C., text at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5105/>

“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches...” says the Bible. As William Sloane Coffin says: “When we are intent upon being, rather than on having, we are happier. And when we are intent on being, we don’t take away from other person’s being --- in fact, we enhance it.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Coffin, William Sloane, Credo (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 51.