

# **“Responding to Poverty and Real-Life Issues”**

Genesis 45:1-15; Romans 11:1-2a; 29-32; Matthew 15:10-28

**Part IV of VI in the Summer Sermon Series,  
“The New Social Gospel”**

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 12th Sunday after Pentecost, August 20, 2023, dedicated to three new Stephen Leaders, Susie Loik, Wendy Kennedy, Duan Cannon (and Gary Glover, too), to Melissa Kulwicki on her birthday, to all the young people considering Confirmation in 2024, to all our new friends considering membership in the coming weeks, to all the men, women and children in our city, state and nation who live below the poverty level and struggle for food, water, work, resources and hope every single day, to the men and women who find shelter on our church grounds and in The Washington Gladden Social Justice Park and always to the glory of God!

First, we must always remember it was the Gospel – seen through the lens of a social justice inflection. On Friday, in our First Reflection – sent via email to everyone – I answered the question, “What is the Social Gospel?”

I wrote that the defining measure of the Social Gospel, posited first by our own Dr. Washington Gladden (who preached from this pulpit for 36 years) was simply this: **the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not intended merely for the salvation of individuals but also for the salvation and transformation of society.** While this may be spectacularly obvious to you, it was not obvious at the turn of the 20th Century when Washington Gladden and other pastors and theologians began to trumpet the call to **Social Salvation.** When so

many people saw the only the thing that mattered was whether, “I am right with Jesus and I will get to heaven,” Gladden said – this is not enough. It is never enough. Salvation is not an “either/or.” It is ALWAYS a “both/and.”

Last week, I offered three foundational guidelines for the Social Gospel. We must know the Climate or **Context** out of which we speak. We must live inside the **Text** of Scripture (all 66 books), and we must always ground our social justice action in **Relationships** – especially lifting up Gladden’s belief that Religion is “friendship” with God and one another. As we strive for relationships and friendships with everyone, we will develop common ground for social change. Today, let’s “Respond to Poverty and Other Real-Life Issues” – grounded in context, text and relationships.

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation. Amen.*

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Our passage from Matthew 15, beginning in verse 10, has many implications for understanding the Social Gospel today. We find Jesus calling the crowd to him and immediately changing how they listened and understood how they were to live in the times in which they were struggling for very existence. Through his teachings and examples, he was flipping the script on what they had been previously taught. In a time with strict dietary laws for Jews, he was teaching a radical concept – it did not matter what went into their mouths as defining who they were as children of God. The only thing that mattered is what came out their mouths. For starving people who were often scandalized

and judged for eating certain foods, this was liberating news. Jesus wants to clear the air (and the intestinal track) with his witness.

However, the script flips in Matthew 15:21. Having just taught strict obedience to the law is less important than the attitude of the heart, Jesus meets his match. We used to have a sign in the Preaching Room at Yale Divinity School which read, “preach what you practice.” Jesus, are you listening and are you understanding?

There, alone in non-Jewish territory, the district of Tyre and Sidon, Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman. He has gone to rest. But, in this region – called “nowhere” in the texts – he doesn’t find rest – he finds confrontation and challenge. He has stepped into a place of tension and prejudice. It is where the bitterest enemies of the Jews reside. It is also here, where Jesus meets his match.

As Matthew 15:21 opens, Jesus seems surprisingly ethnocentric as he is besieged by a relentless, foreign woman – a person with two major cultural/religious strikes against her. The temptation for a preacher here is to try to wriggle around this confrontation as Jesus is painted in less than sterling colors.

The disciples don’t help. They show up and yell, “Send her away!” Those are their exact words – words they have had just used for the hungry thousands who had previously interrupted Jesus’ solitude. In that instance, Jesus challenged the disciples to give their all to the people (see Matthew 14).

Now, instead of being swayed by this foreign woman’s need, Jesus contends that only Israelites figure among the sheep he shepherds. It is as if the woman’s plea was a temptation, an attempt to divert him from his mission to his own kind.

While that may have satisfied the disciples who had arrived and were now listening, the woman’s unyielding love for her daughter impelled her to kneel

before him and beg again for help. He dismissed her with what was probably a common cultural insult: “Dogs don’t get to eat at our table!”

This does nothing to dissuade this intrepid woman. With a mischievous reminder that dogs are far cleverer than sheep, she turns the slight inside out and says she could content herself with scraps if he can find the generosity to share them.

That gets through to Jesus. She touches his heart, and she turns it – through the immensity of her faith. She calls him to preach what he practices. She turns Jesus’ words (and his belief system) on Jesus.

With the same desperate insistence as the woman who snatched a healing by touching his cloak (Matthew 9:20-22) and the unrelenting widow of Luke 18, this nameless woman demonstrates prophetic faith. As someone Isaiah might have called a “foreigner who joined herself to the Lord,” she pushes Jesus and his disciples to accept and embrace the distinctions of gender and nationality as ultimately meaningless. She calls them to remember that God’s creation has no borders; humanity knows no nationality. In effect, she is calling Jesus to act like the Good Samaritan of Luke 10. And what happens next shows how Jesus can change – which is really key to this passage. He grants her what she needs and heals her daughter instantly – because her faith (though not Jewish) is powerful and true. Women change Jesus time and time again. They challenge him and he changes.

The power of these texts is almost too obvious to mention (but I will because I feel compelled to dig deeper). How do we identify ourselves in relation to others? Do we see the world in terms of clear divisions, or do we see the world in a process of growing unity? Where are the boundaries of our sense of solidarity? How does our membership in the body of Christ condition our relationships? Whose burden is also our own? Who is calling us to enlarge our perception and participation as members in the body of Christ today? Beyond all of these borderline and boundary issues, we might ask,

*“If Jesus himself needed a persistent stranger to call him beyond a limited viewpoint, to whom should we be listening today?”*

Here is a lead into the answer – Let’s begin by looking at **AND SEEING AND LISTENING TO** people with two or more strikes against them. They, more than others, can remind us that as human beings we share one and the same birthright and vocation: to love and be loved as God’s chosen.

We do not have to look too far. People with two strikes against them are all around us in Ohio where we rank 32nd out of 50 states in our rates of poverty. In this past year, 1,683,890 Ohioans “REPORTED” income below the poverty level. We stand at 14.9% which is 5% higher than the national average. Like the woman pleading for her daughter to be healed, we have nine Ohio cities where more than half the children live in poverty. Mothers are crying out for their children to be fed. In another 39 cities, the poverty rate for children is at least 30%.

The highest child poverty rates are in Youngstown (57.5%) and East Cleveland. (56.5%). For overall poverty, the highest rates are in East Cleveland (38.9%) and Nelsonville (36.5%). Living in poverty means an income of no more than \$25,465 for a family of four – two adults and two children in a household. For a single parent with two children, it’s \$20,231.

Columbus ranks 48th in our state – with 20% living below the poverty rate and ONLY 30% of our children living below the poverty rate. Stuningly, you will hear and see rates in these small cities and towns that should shake you to the core – Warren, Fostoria, Cambridge, Cleveland, Trotwood, Nelsonville, Ashtabula, Campbell, Canton – are all places where one out of every two children live in poverty. Follow the eastern counties down from the lake and along the Ohio River and you will find abject poverty in Ohio in 2023. Our rural poor are literally starving for food and jobs.

Poverty leaves a mother and a father and each one of their children hungry to start and end each day. A hungry body means a hungry mind and a desperate, impoverished mind, body and soul. A hungry mind and body – desperate for

nutrition and hope – is scary for everyone involved. If you have bullets and not bread, bad things can happen. If you have empty stomachs and an empty bank account – or no bank account at all – hunger will drive you to desperate actions and desperate behaviors.

As we are still the keeper of the Social Gospel, we need to be the ones to right these wrongs. We cannot ever do this by ourselves. And this is where our relationships really matter.

Remember last week – I offered this important guide on Justice work and turning the tables on injustice. First, the work of justice is this: “*We have to figure out what belongs to whom and return it to those from whom it has been taken.*” Figuring this out is not my work alone. It is also not the work of the Justice of Mercy Commission alone or the work of BREAD alone. It has to be the work of all of us. That is why ALL OF US are invited each and every September to House Meetings for BREAD. We are invited deeper into relationship with one another to figure out what needs to be done to address poverty and injustice. Figuring this out is the work of all of us. God is calling us to no less than this work.

The no-name Canaanite woman from Nowhere is representative of every man, woman and child who has no name for us. They are faceless to us. They are unknown and as a result – unrelated to us. But our calling is to find out who they are and what they are facing. We will find solutions to the problems we face when we have names for the people and understand the people we write off as THE PROBLEM.

In my book, *The Genius of Justice*, I tell the story of Power. I have told his story before; I return to him before closing today.

It was late on a chilly Autumn evening when I met “Power” at church. Unlike others who come late at night, “Power’s” request was quite different. He did not ask for money or any help of any kind. He simply wanted me to call the police.

He was sleeping under the shelter of our Broad Street entrance – next to the front doors, beneath the chiseled words, “Enter to Worship Depart to Serve.” He asked if I could tell the police that it was okay for him to sleep there. I agreed to call them. Although I offered him food and drink and blankets, he politely declined. Instead, he asked what time he could return in the morning to work for the church. He desired to work as a thanksgiving to us for our kindness, not for pay. I said, “*Okay,*” and continued, “*Power, why our front steps? Why in the floodlights and noise of Broad Street?*” He answered, “*I feel safe in the light. I feel safe in the shelter of God’s house.*”

The next morning, Power arrived early to begin caring for First Church. On his first day of work, Power raked up 22 bags of leaves in 1½ hours. When a member bought a pair of gloves for Power to protect his hands from the coming cold, he returned them encouraging me to give them to someone who was really in need. Having been abused and even shot in the stomach by his cocaine-addicted father at 13, Power hated to be touched and trusted very few people. In the weeks that followed, it became clear that even the floodlights and shelter of our cathedral stone could not provide what he really needed. Yet, he declined homeless shelters and even offers of other housing. One night, carrying his graceful, yet troubled life and his servant spirit with him, Power disappeared onto the streets of Columbus.

I think of Power often. Bathed in the light and sheltered by God, my abolitionist congregation has sought for 171 years to minister to Power in the heart of the city. Although the mason’s chisel has whittled in stone a command to worship and serve, we have, at times, fallen short of both worship and service. Nevertheless, God has blessed us through the years with “Power” and other men and women like Power who call us to ways of justice and mercy.

When Power first approached me, I did not see the man he was. I did not receive him as a friend on the journey of life. I saw him for the transaction I **assumed** was about to happen. I braced for “the ask” without seeing the



person standing in front of me. The essence of the man was first lost to me. He was the one who broke the icy wall I put up as shield. In his own brokenness, Power was more vulnerable and honest than I.

Too many of us do not know how to love. How are we going to recover the ability to love ourselves and to love one another? Thomas Merton, writing in *The Living Bread*, put it this way:

*The reason why we hate one another or fear one another is that we secretly, or openly, hate and fear our own selves. And we hate ourselves because the depths of our being are a chaos of frustration and spiritual misery. Lonely and helpless, we cannot be at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves, and we cannot be at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God.*

Power is “The Other” to me and too many of us. Like Power, “the Others” sleep on the steps of my church at night. They are frightened to go inside shelters and transitional housing. They are children who have dropped out of school and “disappeared” in the pandemic and have yet to really return. They are women who work three jobs and still can’t find a place to call home for their children. “The Others” are nameless and faceless to too many of us. And yet, their very presence in our lives and in our world should motivate each one of us every day to get up and fight for justice. They must be named. Their faces must be seen and known. They must not be forgotten or forsaken. They are, in the words of scripture, “the poor who are with us always.”

We will address the numbers of poverty when we know the names and faces of poverty. And as for the other “Real life” issues that call to us a people of the New Social Gospel, open your eyes, and look around. You know the issues. They all arise from situations where people do not love themselves and do not love their neighbors. To honour the nameless Canaanite woman and her daughter, to honour and serve Power, let’s do this. The list is long – but together, we can move the needle every day. Together, let’s move the needle – everyday. In the power of God, we can do this. Amen.

