

The New/Old Social Pandemic

The New/Old Social Pandemic:

Homelessness
Marginalization
Immigration

Greg Hildenbrand

Contemplating  Grace
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Greg Hildenbrand

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The New/Old Social Pandemic

Also by Greg Hildenbrand

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Preface

“Iniquity” is inequality, injustice, which seeks more for myself than my rights allow and which gives others less than they should receive...The anxiety to possess what I should not have narrows and diminishes my own soul. Thomas Merton¹

Of the books I have written thus far, I enjoyed writing this one the *least*. I am pleased to be finished and excited to move onto something less convicting. Arguably, this book covers topics more relevant and practical than the others I dabble in. Writing this has been a difficult slog because I live a comfortable, privileged life – and I thoroughly enjoy it. In these pages, however, I attempt to describe the situations of people who suffer, in part, *because* of my

¹ Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island*, The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, 1955, pp. 10-11.

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comfortable, privileged existence. There is no accusing finger of blame pointing at anyone here that does not also point back at me. I am not proud of that fact, but I am trying to own it. And I am taking steps to help – baby steps, no doubt, but steps, nonetheless.

Like volunteering for a worthy cause, one cannot outgive the need. Regardless, something must be done. Even when it will not be enough. *Especially* when it will not be enough...

Greg Hildenbrand
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Chapter 1

The New-Old Social Pandemic

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, ‘...just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’”²

The church my wife and I attend is housed in a large, 100+-year-old stone building in downtown Lawrence, Kansas, a midwestern town of about 100,000 people. Like most mainline churches, membership and participation numbers have decreased dramatically in the recent past. Except for a few hours on Sunday mornings, the building stands largely empty of traditional church-related activities. Because it is located downtown, there are a number of marginalized people – homeless, poor, mentally ill,

² Matthew 25:44-45

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alcoholics and other addicts – in the area. Our church, like many others, has responded admirably to the needs of its immediate community. We offer a free, hot breakfast two mornings each week to all comers, as we have for 30 years. We provide weekly meeting space for numerous *12-Step* groups. On cold winter nights, our church opens its doors as an emergency winter shelter, providing a warm place to sleep until other indoor options open the following morning. We have a used-clothing area and help stock a local food bank. All of these mission-ministries and more are coordinated and staffed by volunteers. An admirable response to the challenges faced by our marginalized populations, yes, but woefully inadequate for the need.

On another front and scrolling non-stop on news channels are the challenges of masses of foreigners trying to enter the United States – some seeking refuge from violence at home, others seeking employment, and still others desiring freedom from oppression and/or a fresh start in life. Many travel tremendous distances at great effort, expense, and risk. The refugee crisis, at least for those of us in the middle states, used to be concentrated in the southern border areas. Not anymore. Migrants have overwhelmed the resources of border communities and spread into all parts of the nation.

Homelessness, marginalization, and migration are not new problems. They probably began shortly after the human population exceeded two. The magnitude of the problems, however, has exploded in recent years, reaching the threshold of a *social pandemic*, in my opinion. *Pandemic* is a term usually reserved for wide-spread disease issues, but

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I feel the term is appropriate for these challenges because, as I will address in the following pages, they are societal diseases – as in *dis-ease* or discomfort – impacting the society at large and not just the individuals experiencing them.

The causes of homelessness, marginalization, and immigration, at least in the West, are largely issues of the inequitable distribution of basic resources like food, shelter, legal protections, and healthcare (mental *and* physical). Yes, population numbers are at historically high levels, but so are available resources. Unfortunately, we are witnessing an increasingly widening gap between the resources possessed by and accruing to the *haves* and the resources accessible to the *have-nots*, both in terms of quality and quantity. Put differently, the foundational problem is *not* one of insufficient resources, but that the resources needed by the marginalized strata are being hoarded or otherwise unnecessarily suppressed by the upper classes, though not always with conscious intent. In addition, the middle class in America, which used to be the largest socio-economic group, has been shrinking toward oblivion for several decades now. Arguably, the fastest growing group of homeless folks today come from those who were once part of the middle class themselves, either as children or younger adults. Many of these people are well-educated, skilled, and often militarily trained. They *know* what they have lost, they want it back, and they have the motivation and *where-with-all* to try to regain it.

It is incumbent on any organization claiming to follow the life and teachings of Jesus to help care for those

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in need of basic life-sustaining resources. But it is seldom easy, inexpensive, comfortable, rewarding, or convenient. Raising funds and finding volunteers to provide even the current level of services our church offers for the less fortunate is increasingly difficult. To expand those services to more adequately meet the growing needs can seem like an impossible dream, even for people of faith.

An *epidemic* is a condition, usually medical in nature, that affects a large number of people over a period of time. A *pandemic* is an epidemic that threatens people across an extensive area, like a country. The causes of epidemics and pandemics are generally seen as harmful *outsiders*, like an alien viral strain that invades and sickens individuals, who then pass it along to others. When a condition is *endemic*, the offending disorder is embedded in our internal systems, so instead of invading from the outside, it lies latent within our bodily systems until conditions encourage its emergence. For example, the *COVID-19* virus began as an illness attacking individuals from outside of themselves. Because of its highly contagious nature, it quickly spread to others and became an epidemic. In a matter of months, it spread widely across large geographic areas and became a national and multi-national pandemic. No one considers COVID as endemic to humans, however, because we only become infected by it from outside of ourselves. What I describe as the new/old social pandemic is actually *endemic* to our social structures and systems, even though its effects occur outside of the offending structures and systems.

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We can apply these terms to organizational structures, particularly those of governments, and find similar processes at play. Although the social crises of homelessness, marginalization, and immigration are not overtly medical in nature, they are often accompanied by many types of serious health risks for individuals and society over time. The invading conditions infecting organizations and nations are social, economic, legal, and political in nature, but they are no less infectious to the populations impacted by those organizations than are alien pathogens to individuals.

The title for this book, *The New-Old Social Pandemic*, expresses my view about the increasingly pervasive crises of homelessness, marginalization, and immigration. The conditions are not *new*, in that they have long impacted individuals. What is *new* are the rapidly increasing numbers of those infected, as well as its pervasiveness over expansive geographic areas. The social conditions of homelessness, marginalization, and immigration were, until recently, largely lower-priority concerns with limited impact that have since grown into epidemics and are now barreling toward pandemic status.

Many of the root causes of homelessness, marginalization, and immigration challenges arise from the social structures that once allowed for large swaths of the population to prosper, at least materially. Those same social systems, by design, have always excluded many folks from the prosperity they bestowed upon others. Those excluded were mostly non-white, non-heterosexual, non-

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Christian, mentally ill, and others deemed as being outside of the norm.

It is increasingly apparent, at least to me, that this social pandemic is *endemic* to our social structures. In other words, instead of being limited to the unique circumstances of relatively few numbers of individuals, as has been argued in the past, the infecting conditions are embedded within and emerging from the designed functioning (or dysfunctioning) of our social systems, including the laws, rules, and regulations of many governmental agencies that are tasked with providing and enforcing social order.

I have never been homeless, never a part of a marginalized group, nor am I an immigrant. I write these thoughts as a privileged outsider looking in. As a white, heterosexual, Christian male, I am a person of privilege who benefits greatly from the current social structures. But the crises of homelessness, marginalization, and immigration are no longer easily-ignored problems *out there*. They are emerging everywhere. They have intruded into my privileged and comfortable space, leaving me with two choices: (1) ignore the issues and hope they migrate elsewhere, or (2) use my privileged status to help mitigate the problems, at the risk of destabilizing my comfortable existence.

Many devotees of Donald Trump's MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement attempt a misguided hybrid of the two options by trying to force those suffering from these conditions to move elsewhere – back under the bridges, back into the shadows, or back to their oppressive home countries. Many of those same people apparently see

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no inconsistency between that sort of treatment of their fellow human beings – their *neighbors* – with the life and teachings of Jesus. For serious Christians, as students and followers of Jesus, the choice is not *whether* to address the suffering of the homeless, marginalized, and immigrants, but *how* best to do so. And the time for action is not ambiguous; the time is *now*.

The social pandemic causing the increasingly invasive and pervasive crises of homelessness, marginalization, and immigration is often treated as if it originates from a number of independent causes, as opposed to a widespread crisis stemming from a common (but complex) cause that creates multiple manifestations of misery throughout society. Jim O’Connell, a physician who spent his professional career caring for homeless folks in the Boston area, made this point in a talk given at a charitable event and quoted in the epigraph for the next chapter. The social systems designed to assure at least a minimally-adequate provision of healthcare, public health, housing, welfare, education, legal standing, and corrections services are failing to do so at an increasingly alarming rate. The deficiencies manifest as homelessness here, marginalization of various populations there, and immigration nightmares elsewhere, flaring out like wheel spokes from a common hub. The hub is the deficient design and functioning of our social systems. What I refer to as the social pandemic is *not* the individual crises of homelessness, marginalization, and immigration; *the social*

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pandemic is the failure of system design and functioning that creates our homelessness, marginalization, and immigration disasters. Those systems, originally intended to serve the common interests of the majority, are increasingly benefitting a privileged minority and oppressing the growing numbers of people outside of it. Clearly, this is unsustainable, and the issues resulting in homelessness, marginalization, and immigration difficulties can only be adequately addressed by a major overhaul of the offending systems. That overhaul, however, will require a significant change in the attitudes and expectations of those who benefit from the systems, meaning those who do not currently need the services.

It is difficult to identify a scapegoat for this crisis because its origins stem from countless, (mostly) well-intentioned actions over many decades. It reminds me of the unclean spirit Jesus confronts in the gospel of Mark. Jesus asks the demon his name, to which the spirit responds, “*My name is Legion; for we are many.*”³ Social systems are created in response to needs. They establish guidelines for how a society engages and addresses issues like healthcare, housing, poverty, education, and crime. They define minimum standards that, when not met, should trigger a systemic response intended to bring the person(s) or condition back up to the standard. One significant problem is the increasing cost of establishing and maintaining the systems, which inevitably leads to chronic shortages in staffing and resources adequate for

³ Mark 5:9

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the need. A second issue is that most of these programs rely on taxpayers feeling a charitable obligation to provide for the disadvantaged through increased taxes and optional giving – an urge that diminishes in the face of other spending options. A third problem, becoming increasingly apparent, is that the systems have *holes* where people in need become mired in a bureaucratic morass because their individual situation does not fit within the system's designed structure. In particular, those who are non-English-speaking, those with chronic mental or physical health conditions, those without reliable transportation or internet access, those with no permanent address or phone number, those with substance abuse issues or criminal records, and those without legal status, among others, are at special risk of finding themselves outside the social safety nets. Those with more than one of these conditions will almost certainly fall outside the system, and the numbers of those folks are rising.

What I wish to emphasize is that this social pandemic is exactly that – a *social* pandemic. It negatively impacts *everyone* in society, although the disadvantaged suffer in far greater ways than the rest of us. Like a *black hole*, however, it eventually swallows everything in its proximity. The pandemic has been caused by our collective actions, mostly unintentionally and unconsciously, in the sense that we have no conscious idea how we perpetuate the problem. Regardless, to rectify the issue will require a massive and long-term effort by individuals, organizations, and governments. Otherwise, increasing numbers will be

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victimized by this new/old pandemic until one day it
infects all of us.

Chapter 2

Homelessness

“I like to think of this problem of homelessness as a prism held up to society, and what we see refracted are the weaknesses in our health care system, our public health system, our housing system, ... our welfare system, our educational system, ... our legal system, and our correctional system. Dr. Jim O’Connell⁴

There are three, rapidly-growing groups of victims I cite as evidence of a current social pandemic – the homeless (or *houseless*), the marginalized, and those trapped in an immigration nightmare – all of which stem from inadequate and inequitable social systems. The victims I am most familiar with are among the homeless. I am not an expert (which has never stopped me before), but I have

⁴ As quoted by Tracy Kidder in *Rough Sleepers*, Random House, 2023, pp. 211-2.

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interacted with homeless folks often enough to know a handful of names and something about their situations.

Being housed, as I use the term here, means having a reliable place to shelter from the weather. It also means being relatively safe from theft or assault, having a place for uninterrupted sleep, access to facilities for maintaining personal hygiene, and space to store food and other possessions. So, being housed might be a rented room or something larger that may or may not be shared with others, but it is a permanent structure that provides greater privacy, safety, and storage than living unhoused.

Homelessness is not a homogeneous issue, meaning it manifests in different ways and stems from numerous causes. It may begin from an acute situation like losing one's residence due to a temporary loss of income. Some people find themselves intermittently homeless, meaning they can sometimes find shelter with friends or family for limited lengths of time. Intermittent homelessness is also called housing insecurity. These folks move from place to place and find themselves homeless for the periods between short-term housing options, often with friends or family. Chronic homelessness occurs when one has no family or friends who will shelter them, they lack the resources to shelter themselves without outside assistance, and their prospects for attaining or accepting those resources on a sustainable basis are poor. There are a few who are chronically homeless by choice because they prefer being unhoused to abiding by the rules for shelters or subsidized housing.

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The challenges of homelessness include food insecurity, inadequate shelter, access to adequate mental and physical healthcare, storage for possessions, theft and assault, boredom, sleep deprivation, maintaining bodily hygiene, and more. And the problems are cumulative, meaning each problem gets worse as additional problems arise. For example, when one has minimal possessions *and* nowhere to safely store them, they are at constant risk of having what little they do possess stolen. Or when one suffers from untreated mental illness and cannot access regular care and medications, their illness may prevent them from getting a job that would help them become housed, or they may engage in socially disruptive behaviors that land them in jail. The homeless folks I know navigate multiple challenges constantly.

Many homeless folks must carry their possessions wherever they go, sometimes in a suitcase or backpack, sometimes in a trash bag. Some have access to storage space for some of what they do not need daily, others do not. One man told me of several nice guitars he keeps in a storage locker until the locker owner padlocked the unit so he could no longer access them. The decision to accept potentially helpful items they are offered, like food, water, coats, and the like, must be weighed against the burden of carrying them around. Because they have so little, and because what they have is important to them, they are generally very protective of it and rightfully paranoid that others may steal it if they leave it unattended to sleep or even to take a shower. Thus, the wide-spread issue of sleep deprivation and its consequences, like aggravated mental

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health symptoms, short tempers, and difficulty thinking clearly is perpetuated.

It takes time and patience to earn enough trust from most homeless persons for them to even tell you their name, let alone their circumstances. Many refuse to look others in the eye because they see or suspect harsh judgement staring back at them. Most develop a keen ability to quickly assess the motives and sincerity of those they encounter and will quickly shun pity or objectification. Like the rest of us, they want, need, and deserve to be treated as individuals of value and worth.

There is an on-going debate in human-development discussions about whether the particulars of our lives play out more according to the genetic codes in our DNA or the environment in which we are raised – nature vs. nurture. The argument centers around whether our experiences are shaped more by our inherent leanings (genetics and impulses), what we have experienced and learned (environment and education), or by conscious choices made in the moment (free will). Most human experiences and behaviors have multiple influences, so the nature/nurture debate is perhaps best framed as a continuum of causal possibilities instead of trying to identify a single, definitive cause. In other words, a person's life does not play out as it does based solely on genetics or their environment. What we can say with certainty, however, is there can be huge differences in how

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individual lives play out, even within families (genetics) *and* within shared cultural contexts (environment).

Abraham Lincoln is said to have believed that people are shaped by their circumstances, so he leaned toward the view of one's environment being the stronger influence. From that belief, he strove to interact with those of differing points of view by first trying to understand the circumstances under which their experiences developed, a practice that would help us better understand homelessness today. He interacted with those opposing him as people with a particular history, instead of objectifying them as obstacles to what he, with his history, believed to be right. The main source of contention in his day was slavery. Although he opposed slavery, one of his best friends was a slave-owner, and their relationship allowed him to assess the pro-slavery position through the life-experiences of a trusted colleague.

It is ridiculous to assume any of the current victims of homelessness were genetically programmed to become homeless. True, there is evidence that a propensity for certain types of mental illness may be passed along genetically, and some homeless folks are mentally ill. Certainly, race and skin color are inherited traits, and many among the homeless are non-white. But the vast majority of those with a mental illness are housed, as is also true of non-whites. It is a person's experiences after birth that strongly influence their subsequent existence. And two primary developmental influences shaping a person after birth are family dynamics and the social structures and systems they encounter. The social systems identified by

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Dr. O’Connell in this chapter’s epigraph – healthcare, public health, housing, welfare, education, legal, and corrections – are increasingly failing the populations they serve and are sending too many people to prison, homelessness, or other undesirable existences as a result. In other words, the shortcomings of our social systems are the direct cause of most homelessness today. Homelessness cannot be solved by its victims, only by those who shape, support, and/or benefit from those systems.

One implication of believing a person’s life-situation is largely shaped by their environment is this: If I (or you) were subjected to an environment like that of one who experiences homelessness, I (or you) would be likely to experience homelessness, too. We witness the strong environmental influence on reality playing out in family dynamics where persons raised in abusive environments are much more likely to abuse their own children. Substance abuse often follows a similar pattern where children raised by regular abusers of drugs or alcohol are more likely to become regular abusers of drugs or alcohol themselves. Poorly educated parents are more likely to raise poorly educated children. Those raised in neighborhoods with significant gang activity are more likely to become gang members themselves. The saying, *“There, but for the grace of God, go I”* is particularly relevant to this discussion.

No one is immune from falling into unfortunate circumstances and experiencing unfortunate outcomes, at least not with the current state of the governing systems. It

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is important to understand that those who are *not* homeless, marginalized, or otherwise ostracized by unjust systems *are* the creators, supporters, and benefactors of those systems – if not directly, then indirectly through their votes and socio-political activities. Most of us are in the majority that indirectly controls governmental actions and policies. We may not consciously intend to drive more folks into homelessness, but we do perpetuate injustice by our silence and/or by not actively working for appropriate changes to the systems, beginning with agreeing to fund them properly.

Sadly, this is not only a matter of social justice, but also of self-interest.

“Homelessness is associated with dereliction, dispossession, instability, rootlessness, restlessness, emptiness and chronic longing.”⁵

In considering the social pandemic of *homelessness*, it is interesting to explore the archetypes of houses and homes. Symbolically, a house represents the container for the *soul* or the *true self*. In dreams, a house often represents our *psyche*. The exterior may symbolize how we present ourselves to the world, windows represent our view of the world from the inside, doors control our interactions with the external environment, and the interior symbolizes our inner life. A soul without a container has no protection

⁵ *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*, Taschen, Cologne, Germany. 2010, p. 556.

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from the outside world. When we dream of a current or former house, we often see rooms that have been rearranged or relocated, as well as rooms that never existed in our lived experience. The differences between dream experiences and those of waking consciousness often represent unrealized, unacknowledged, or repressed parts of our essential selves. The symbolic language of dreams differs significantly from the language of our waking world, so most dream images cannot be understood literally but must be analyzed in the context of one's experiences and associations, as well as by the archetypal associations of the imagery. Houses and homes are common themes in thoughts and dreams, the understanding of which may help us better decipher the psychological impacts of homelessness.

Symbols tap into deeper streams of shared consciousness than the singular experiences of individuals, communities, or time periods reveal. They exist as collections of patterns or images – *archetypes* – that both transcend and include all time periods, cultures, and events experienced by conscious beings. For example, the symbolic meaning of a house is similar across all times and cultures, even though the structural nature and appearance of houses differs significantly based on the time in history, geographic location, and the culture in which they were built.

While the terms *house* and *home* are often used synonymously, there are important symbolic distinctions. A *house* is a stationary structure that may be free-standing, an apartment, or a rented room. It symbolizes a physical

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barrier between a person and the outside world. A *home*, on the other hand, is an emotional construct, a sense of safety and comfort. For example, we can be physically housed but *feel* homeless in the same way we can be in the physical presence of others and feel lonely. Home has strong emotional associations like, *home is where the heart is*, and *feeling at home*. Home may not always be a physical structure since some feel most at home in nature or in the presence of a close friend. Houses are often transitory places that provide shelter and safety with little or no emotional attachment. Home is primarily an inner state of consciousness, where a house is an external reality. Both are vital to mental and physical well-being.

As we examine the challenges faced by homeless/houseless persons, a comprehensive view must include both physical and emotional, external and internal aspects. Houses provide a psychological and physical barrier to external threats, even when that barrier is porous. They provide a place for storage and, thus, allow one to accumulate resources for a more comfortable existence than what they can carry around with them. Most houses provide spaces for food preparation and storage, facilities for maintaining physical hygiene, a mailing address, and a place for a good night's sleep. Houses provide a type of physical *rootedness* and privacy – a contained sense of *self* – while allowing a degree of control over one's interactions with the external world.

A *home*, on the other hand, provides a sense of *emotional rootedness* where one feels safe, accepted, and even loved. Some of the symbolism of *home* traces to our days in

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our mother's womb, where our needs were met in a warm, safe, accepting environment. Much religious symbolism of *home* points to a life-after-life – heaven perhaps – where happiness and love rule. Without a sense of home we feel emotionally vulnerable and on constant alert. As a general rule, it is difficult to establish a feeling of *home* without first having a house to shelter one's physical existence. If the soul's container is symbolized as a *house*, the absence of a house leaves the soul vulnerable and unable to establish or maintain a dependable connection with its maker, symbolized by *home*.

In more practical, non-symbolic terms, *homelessness* – feeling emotionally adrift – is the more widespread issue and can result in numerous psychological and emotional maladies. *Houselessness*, however, is the more immediate threat to the health and well-being of individuals and communities and, in most cases, must be resolved prior to dealing with homelessness. Fortunately, as houselessness is successfully addressed, much homelessness decreases of its own accord.

*The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.*⁶

Many churches, particularly downtown churches, face a challenging dilemma when it comes to the homeless. My

⁶ Lamentations 3:19

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own church is among them. I am certain that homeless persons today are disenfranchised in ways comparable to the folks Jesus focused his ministry on and that Jesus explicitly instructed us to care for and about. Christian churches, by definition, consider themselves to be followers of the Christ as manifested through Jesus of Nazareth. And the life work of Jesus always included the undesirables, the outcasts, and those different in various ways from so much of his society – the lepers, those possessed by demons, the widows and children, and the foreigners. He exposed the religious elite for their hypocrisy and arrogance in portraying themselves as holier and more righteous than others. He also exposed the greed and stinginess of the rich folks of his day. I used to thank God I was not among the religious elite or the rich folks that Jesus criticized – until I realized I am. And my encounters with the homeless, among others, brought me to that realization because holiness and richness are entirely relative terms.

Most churches built their existence on carefully scripted and time-limited services that included worshipful music, inspiring sermons, liturgical affirmations, and pious prayers for those inside and outside the church. Attendees dressed in nice, clean clothes and strove to conform to the appearance and conduct expectations of *good, up-standing church folk*. Somewhere in the historical development of the church, those were ensconced among the standards considered important and *Christian*. Interestingly, those types of standards do *not* come from the Bible or the types of fellowship modeled by Jesus.

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Homeless folks can publicly expose hypocrisy in religious institutions and the *good, Christian folks* who attend and support them, just as Jesus did. My church adopted the motto, “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors,” as have many other churches. But we struggle with how best to live up to and into that motto, both individually and as a church. For example, our doors are wide open for worship but are locked the rest of the week with access only granted by an entry code, prescheduled event, or video contact with the office. That has become a regrettable necessity in recent years for the protection of the staff because of the numbers of marginalized people seeking shelter and a place for respite. Although the majority of homeless folks are not a physical threat to others, there are those with untreated mental illness or substance issues whose behaviors can be unpredictable. And our church building is large and our staff numbers are small. Even so, I feel a twinge of hypocrisy when I attempt to reconcile our “Open (but locked) Doors.”

Although our church makes admirable efforts to assist many of the homeless and other disenfranchised folks, we do not always manifest “Open Hearts” or “Open Minds” well, either. Admittedly, many homeless and marginalized people present differently from the rest of us. They often smell different, their clothes may be dirty and fit poorly, many will not look us in the eye or speak clearly. When we behave as if the way folks have traditionally presented themselves in church is the expectation for acceptable entry into the church, we have further ostracized an already alienated sector of God’s children

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who are unable to meet our patently *extra*-biblical standards for appearance and behavior. And many of those folks have very simple immediate needs – like a restroom, a cup of coffee, a smile of welcome, or a warm space on a cold day. My church does a good job of inviting these folks to worship, but most of us cannot help but notice their differences. I believe they notice our noticing and interpret (sometimes correctly) that as a harsh judgement on their personhood. Although we would (hopefully) never say it aloud, we may silently project a message of unworthiness, of undesirability, or even of *un*-goodness. Jesus would roll over in his tomb (were he still there). As Christians, we must learn to see, acknowledge, and treat people of difference as equally worthy and valued children of God, as Jesus did.

Showing mercy is a hallmark of the life and teachings of Jesus. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and helping care for those who cannot care for themselves are important acts of mercy. But mercy alone is not sufficient. South African Bishop Desmond Tutu said, “There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.” Pulling people out of the river is an act of mercy. Finding out why they are falling in and addressing the cause is justice, often called *righteousness* in the Bible. Both must be priorities for churches and individuals trying to follow Jesus, and there are no quick, easy, or convenient solutions.

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Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.⁷

I have written that the homeless often expose the hypocrisy of Christian churches, particularly those located in areas where marginalized persons congregate, which is not meant to imply that it is easy to follow Jesus' example in ministering to the disenfranchised. As a music leader I am sometimes confronted with an unexpected disruption from someone whose desires or needs do not match the planned flow of a worship service. For example, a number of years ago a ragged-looking man entered the sanctuary, stumbled to the front, and loudly insisted that we sing "Amazing Grace." He had fresh blood streaked down his left forearm, had been drinking, and looked and smelled like he hadn't showered, shaved, or changed clothes for many days. My first instinct was to ignore him, hoping he would go away. The band and I were leading the congregation through a scheduled song set which did not include his request. He stood at the foot of the steps before the altar and loudly pleaded for "Amazing Grace." I finally told him if he would take a seat on the pew in front, I would sing the song with him when we finished the scheduled songs. A short time later, I took my guitar, led him to a room beside the sanctuary, and we sang "Amazing Grace" together. He sang passionately, almost desperately. I witnessed the powerful impact of the song as he relaxed and tears streamed down his face. When we finished and I

⁷ Matthew 25:40

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was called back into the service, he thanked me and exited the building. I never saw him again, but the encounter moves me still today. In retrospect, and given Jesus' words from Matthew 25, I wonder: could this have been Jesus manifesting as a socially distasteful person providing an opportunity for me and my church to serve a very simple, if inconvenient need? I now wish I would've strayed from the worship *script* and had the entire congregation join the singing, too.

The fact is that homeless and other marginalized populations disrupt our worship services in various ways with some regularity. But are marginalized persons actually disrupting our services, or are the established rhythms of our services disrupting our willingness or ability to serve these *othered* children of God? Which should be the higher priority? Recently, in the middle of the sermon, a homeless man walked up to the altar and threw a cup of water onto the open Bible and altar, mumbled something unintelligible, and stormed out of the building. Some of us knew this person from previous encounters as a moody substance abuser. We should not, however, ignore his status as a fellow human being, loved (at least) by God, with a need that the structure of our worship service did not accommodate. Serving the marginalized is seldom easy or comfortable. I doubt it was easy in Jesus' day either, but he persisted as if they *were* his ministry, not interruptions to it. I believe our challenge is to find a way to serve *all* people, including and especially those like these two men. Who can God love and care for them through if not the church?

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In my understanding of the inconvenient words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 25:31-46, how we treat the *least* in society *is* how we treat Jesus. In other words, we reveal our love for and commitment to Jesus in the ways we care for and about the marginalized in our midst. Following Jesus is drastically inconsistent with commonly held beliefs about the pursuit of our happiness. It requires difficult and sacrificial choices on our part. In his own words: “If any want to become my followers, let them *deny themselves* and *take up their cross* daily and follow me”⁸ (emphasis added).

It seems that following Jesus requires us to hold everything we have in life loosely: giving where there is need, integrating where there is exclusion, actively working for mercy and justice in the face of suffering and injustice, making ourselves increasingly available as instruments for God to work through in loving and caring for others. Holding our *stuff* loosely is only sacrificial and painful when we believe and act as if our lives and possessions belong to us instead of to God – which is patently unbiblical. It is only destabilizing when we lack faith that God will love and care for us as we love and care for others. The image of God manifested through Jesus asks *everything* of us in return for finding our place in the egalitarian family of God – the kingdom of heaven, in Jesus’ words. It requires a degree of faith and commitment I lack and resist, but I cannot deny its persistent pull, nor can I claim ignorance of what is being asked.

⁸ Luke 9:23

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If we believe the Gospels, our following of Jesus is reflected and revealed in the ways we care for and treat those who look and act differently from us.

Chapter 3

Poverty

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Luke 6:20

Homelessness is a subset of poverty, and many of the challenges of homelessness remain even after one becomes housed, but now under the guise of poverty. Poverty, however, is the broader issue, impacts greater numbers of people, and encompasses a wider range of sources of suffering. Where living unhoused threatens the basic need for physical protection, a whole host of other unsettling vulnerabilities exist for persons, families, and communities even after the housing issue has been remediated.

I begin with a detour from poverty *per se* to the more general issue of *marginalization*, which is the exclusion

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of certain persons due to their race, ethnic background, financial and/or social status, among other issues that differentiate them from those in power. Marginalization results in various forms and degrees of discrimination against those marginalized, sometimes overtly, but often in covert ways entrenched so deeply within the governing systems of society as to be nearly invisible to those not victimized by it. Regardless, marginalization creates a modern-day, American *caste system*. While we tend to consider caste systems as antiquated social structures limited to past times in India, they are still present in many parts of Indian and other cultures in various forms of social stratification, oppression, and privilege. And like most social structures that directly oppress one group of people to the benefit of others, there are efforts to mask the outward appearance of castes even though the resulting injustices continue unabated, like putting lipstick on a pig.

Underlying India's caste system is the Hindu belief in *reincarnation* – that one's current life is but a single manifestation of a sequential series of lives through which a soul matures toward its consummation as a perfected, universal Being. The nature and conditions of one's current life is predetermined by the degree to which one matured in their previous life. As such, one's current life-experience is understood to be the experience one has chosen, regardless of how abysmal and unjust that experience may appear. In other words, we get what we deserve; or in agricultural terms, we reap what we sow. Attempts to break free from one's caste assignment, whether by an individual or society, must ultimately fail

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because one's current situation was determined in another stage of life.

When I refer to marginalization in the West as a modern-day caste system, I mean to say there is a common, if usually unspoken, misconception about the marginalized in society – that they are getting what they deserve. That *if* they had worked harder, *if* they had studied more or gone farther in school, or *if* they had followed the same strategies for success as the non-marginalized folks they would find themselves in a better life-situation. That misconception stems from the assumption that opportunities for success and advancement established and maintained by the historical majority function equally well across all genders, ethnic backgrounds, races, and socio-economic realities. But research consistently shows that not to be the case. Those in the majority fail to see how their biases and privilege are embedded in the foundations of educational, employment, law enforcement, and other social systems and skew their benefits to favor those most like the designers of the systems. Those design flaws result in caste-like tiers of social environments where it is difficult to rise to higher caste levels but increasingly easy to fall lower.

As long as poverty is believed to result from the lack of individual effort – that everyone is rewarded in ways consistent with their efforts – those living in poverty will be treated as if their life-situation is entirely their own fault. This belief ignores the masses who have fallen from higher socio-economic levels into poverty because of corporate downsizing, medical bankruptcy, disabling conditions, jobs being automated or shipped overseas, and other

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unfortunate situations completely out of their control. These *downwardly mobile* folks are, instead, casualties of antiquated capitalistic and social systems skewed to benefit and perpetuate those in power.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus claims that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor (Luke 6:20). It is an interesting and perplexing statement given the degree of suffering of the poor in Jesus' day, not to mention the suffering today. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus says, "For you always have the poor with you..." (14:7), implying to some that there is nothing we can do to eliminate poverty. Throughout the gospels, Jesus encourages folks to be merciful to the poor, which creates a direct connection between following Jesus and caring for and about those in poverty. Thus, the core dilemma of poverty is *our* dilemma, meaning *what are we going to do about it?* Because Jesus did not ignore the poor, we cannot ignore them either, at least not if we consider ourselves his followers. Or his disciples. Or Christians.

Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. Matthew 5:42

I remember learning about the *cycle of poverty* as an undergraduate in college. For me, it was a stunning revelation about how public efforts intended to help prevent tragic conditions like starvation, exposure, and other unacceptable living situations sometimes create self-perpetuating systems that produce unintended and

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unfortunate side-effects. These well-intentioned programs may establish an effective *floor* below which few will fall, but at the same time may incentivize or force others to drop from higher levels down to the new floor. For example, although fewer people may die of starvation because of subsidized food programs, more people may become impoverished because the income limits required to qualify for food subsidies can best be met by allowing one's current financial situation to deteriorate. The new incentive of subsidized food can become a disincentive for people to earn enough to stay above the income level where one must buy one's own food. This situation produces a perpetuating *cycle of poverty* because it creates a gap between the income limit to qualify for public support and the income required to live independently. It widens the divide between the *haves* and the *have-nots* in society. For those able to work, the requirements to bridge that gap and earn enough to rise out of poverty becomes too great a hurdle and takes too much time and effort for many folks to cross. The additional education, training, and/or work experience required to earn a higher income forces folks to choose between (1) struggling without public assistance for a time, or (2) remaining on public assistance indefinitely and foregoing what is necessary to qualify for a job that could lift them out of poverty. And that is a stark, if oversimplified illustration of the cycle of poverty.

Before proceeding, I should acknowledge the controversial and shaky ground on which I am treading. On the one hand, I doubt anyone accepting any form of government assistance would consider it more than barely

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adequate for their needs, if that. Keeping one's head above water on public assistance is a constant and often humiliating struggle. On the other hand, most tax-payers who fund the subsidization programs have financial challenges of their own, aside from paying the additional taxes required to fund public assistance programs. The collective dilemma is to create effective *mercy* systems that meet the most desperate needs of the former group without forcing or incentivizing those in the latter group closer to or into the situation of the former.

Most Western societies have complex webs of social supports intended to establish living conditions below which they aim to keep folks from falling. In ages past, perhaps, greater numbers of those in desperate circumstances would perish because there were no social safety-nets to catch them, unless they had family or friends willing and able to help. Because there are many legitimate demands on limited public funds, the minimum acceptable living conditions established by public policy are typically well below the desired living conditions for most of the rest of us. And so there is a constant balancing act in public forums between the interests of those advocating for the needs of the poor and those advocating on behalf of the subsidizers (taxpayers) of the needs of the poor. One unfortunate result is the American *caste system* where visible chasms develop between the living conditions of the poor and those of the non-poor. Those experiencing poverty may not starve, but most will not thrive, either. And the *cycle of poverty* assures that many, if not most will remain stuck at their current level.

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Because of the rancor against raising taxes and the cry for more public funding for the disadvantaged, government bureaucracies grow in size, expense, and complexity as they establish, verify, and monitor how and to whom what types of public assistance will be granted. When I was learning about the *cycle of poverty*, decades ago, the best estimates were that for every dollar spent on public assistance programs, only about 20 cents went to the actual need. The rest was tied up in regulations, means testing, fraud prevention, and other bureaucratic red-tape. My cynical guess is that the percentage of public-assistance funds that directly *assists* someone in need is far less than 20% today.

No one wants themselves or others falling into living conditions with tragic implications, at least not if it can be helped. Yet, no one who works hard to support their household without assistance wants to see anyone receiving public assistance live in better conditions than they do, either. And no one wants people to get sucked into a whirlpool of downward mobility that disincentivizes efforts to keep one's own head above water. The responses provided by governmental departments are necessarily complex and inefficient. Non-government organizations often operate closer to the need and with less complexity. Jesus' instruction to his followers, as individuals, is simple but challenging: "*Give to everyone who begs from you...*" The important point to me is that we cannot abdicate our personal responsibility to do what we can to help, whether as taxpayers, charitable givers, or volunteers.

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*He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them, for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."*⁹

There is a relative aspect to *being poor* or *living in poverty* that is often overlooked, which is to say that *poor* and *poverty* are not well-defined, objective terms, even though regional governments set specific incomes that qualify one as living at or below the *poverty level*. The federal government's *Federal Poverty Level (FPL)* is based on income, geographic location, and household size, and states often use the FPL as a basis for qualifying folks for assistance. Other than that, however, our judgement of a person as *poor* is usually a subjective judgement about a person appearing to be *poor-er* than another person. For example, someone living at or below the poverty level might be considered poor here but well off in a third-world country. And even though the cost of living elsewhere may be considerably less, so too are the living expenses that are considered *necessities* here – like internet access, mobile phones, private vehicles, cable TV, and the like.

Taking the relative nature of poverty to an extreme, no one would consider a millionaire as poor. But a millionaire is *poor-er* than a billionaire, at least financially. We naturally assume anyone with a nice home, nice car,

⁹ Luke 21:1-4

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stylish clothes, and/or the latest smartphone is doing well financially, but it is not necessarily true. A recent article in *Forbes Advisor*¹⁰ quoted a *Payroll.com* study that found 78% of Americans were precariously living *paycheck-to-paycheck* in 2023. Living *paycheck-to-paycheck* generally means that missing as little as a single paycheck could drive a person or household into a significant debt spiral, bankruptcy, or even homelessness. These are people without sufficient savings to absorb the costs of a moderate car repair, home repair, or medical procedure, let alone to set anything aside for emergencies or retirement. Is their situation different than that of someone living in poverty who lives welfare check to welfare check? Of course, there are likely differences in the scale of the financial deficiency and the nature of what they consider necessary living expenses, but the personal and collective impacts of their hardships may be similar. There is also the issue of free will in spending one's available money. One homeless man told me that although he could qualify for assistance to rent an apartment, he preferred living in a tent where he was not subject to the rules and restrictions in place for those receiving housing assistance.

Even Jesus, who spent the last years of his life as a homeless teacher, speaks of the relative nature of poverty as he compares the two copper coins put into the temple treasury by the “poor widow” with the financial gifts of the “rich people,” describing the widow’s contribution as

¹⁰ “Living Paycheck to Paycheck Statistics 2024,” *Forbes Advisor*, April 2, 2024.

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“more than” the others (Luke 21:1-4). Of course he was referring to the relative or subjective contribution of what she gave in relation to what she had, as opposed to the absolute or objective contribution. When viewed in relative terms, the widow was more generous than the rich people.

The relative nature of *being poor* and *living in poverty* is evidenced in how different people distinguish a *need* from a *want* and *immediate needs* from *future desires*. Credit is easily attainable by most folks now, so acquiring what once would only have been a future desire suddenly feels like an immediate need. The fact that credit always comes at an additional cost, either in interest charges or higher initial costs or both, often fails to outweigh the temporary satisfaction gained by obtaining something one desires sooner, at least until the burden of the extra cost threatens one’s ability to meet other critical needs in the near future. Such *self-imposed poverty* is rampant across many income levels.

Clearly, one’s ability to control spending impulses is a significant factor for some in not having enough money to cover basic living expenses. I hear stories of people winning lots of money in the lottery, only to squander it and end up in worse financial shape than they were prior to winning. Jesus’ story of *The Prodigal Son* comes to mind (Luke 15:11-32). Advertising, peer pressure, and expectations set by various media offerings all conspire against a frugal lifestyle. When we compare ourselves with others, we often feel our lives and possessions do not measure up – exactly as ads and posts are intended to make us feel. It can leave us feeling inferior and less worthy if we

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wrongly discern where our true value lies. *Spoiler alert: personal value is not a product of one's possessions.*

Insufficient funds to meet necessary living expenses may be the primary manifestation of poverty, but it is not the the only one.

*For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish...*¹¹ Mark 14:7

Poverty is the lack of something. The most familiar form of poverty is the lack of enough money to meet a real or perceived need. Not everyone who lives in poverty, however, lacks money. There are other types of poverty, many of which result in intense suffering: poverty of spirit, moral poverty, emotional poverty, poor physical or mental health, lack of self-control, and lack of companionship, to name a few. While many believe money will solve their particular brand of poverty, beyond a certain minimal level of income, additional money for some is more likely to exacerbate the problem than to solve it because lack of money is not the cause of their poverty.

One of many things Jesus said that is often taken out of context is "...you always have the poor with you." His words are sometimes used as justification for doing little or nothing for the poor – Jesus says the poor will *always* be with us, as if nothing we do can change that situation. Most people who take the ministry of Jesus

¹¹ Mark 14:7

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seriously, however, would not assume him to imply anything of the sort. He may simply have given a nod to the relative nature of poverty, meaning there will always be people poorer than us who lack something we can offer. Indeed, he focused his ministry on caring for and teaching those who lacked something of importance. *It was never, however, a lack of money he addressed.* Rather, his attention focused on the underlying condition of their poverty. True, he sometimes ordered hungry people to be fed and naked people to be clothed. Those types of *mercy* responses were important to him, as they should be for us. Mercy responses, however, do not address the foundational cause of the on-going need for mercy. Jesus recognized that suffering often originates from something deeper than the outward symptoms: lack of sight (especially insight), limited knowledge or understanding, questions about self-worth, poor physical and/or mental health, and a myriad of other afflictions that inhibited full participation in the routine life-activities of the community. As such, they were ostracized, multiplying the already-devastating impact of their poverty. He saw, as others could not, that people need to be taught, encouraged, accepted, healed, and allowed back into the flow of life with others. The suffering Jesus addressed had little to do with money but everything to do with poverty.

Recognizing the relative nature of poverty helps us understand that *everyone* lacks something, meaning every individual is poorer than certain others in one way or another. And if what they lack causes suffering, there is poverty, regardless of whether their lack is real or imagined.

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Jesus did not limit his ministry to any specific socio-economic or ethnic class of people. He extended his healing attention to Gentiles (non-Jews), the rich, the well-educated, and even to their Roman occupiers because he recognized that when poverty causes suffering, it requires attention regardless of a person's background. All that was required from the sufferer was self-recognition of their need and a belief that Jesus could help. In his eyes, the suffering of a poor widow or a leper was no more or less important than that of a Roman centurion or a tax collector.

Author and Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies, Amy-Jill Levine, commenting on the larger context of Jesus' words in Mark 14:3-9 about the poor being always with us, including its Old Testament allusion to Deuteronomy 15:11, writes, "The point is not that we should ignore the poor, or that we should despair because we can do nothing about solving the problem of poverty. The point is that we always have the opportunity to provide for others."¹²

Suffering, whether ours or that of others, is a goad to change. It tells us that the status quo is not working, and we need to adjust accordingly. Remember, Jesus' first command was to *repent*, meaning to change. And the change must be on our part because we cannot change others. Whenever and however we come face-to-face with suffering we should ask, "What can *I* change to improve

¹² Amy-Jill Levine, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2018, p. 101.

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this situation?” Sometimes the situation calls for us to give, other times to receive, but the presence of poverty always invites us to change. We cannot transform our inner experience or outer world without it.

... (Jesus) said to him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.”¹³

There are many different types and manifestations of poverty, which is not exclusively an affliction of the poor. Some form of poverty – financial, physical, mental, emotional – afflicts everyone at some time in their life. Certainly, the focus of Jesus’ life and ministry was on those suffering due to illness, social isolation, or oppression, regardless of their ethnic, religious, or their socio-economic status. He was drawn to the hurting and sought to lift people out of their anguish by opening them to what he called the *kingdom of heaven*. Most people, then as now, were unable to grasp the nature of this *kingdom*, wrongly imagining it to be a *new-and-improved* version of what they were currently living (sometimes imagining a kingdom where they could be the oppressors instead of the oppressed). This kingdom, however, is not simply *life-as-we-know-it* without the annoyances of bothersome people or lack of money. Rather, the kingdom of heaven is a higher level of conscious existence where today’s challenges,

¹³ John 21:16

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while still present, take on a new appearance and effect – not because our circumstances change but because *we* change, along with our perspectives, understandings, and priorities.

Putting aside the lack of food and shelter required for survival, many other types of poverty are products of misinformed assumptions and perspectives about *needs*. If we feel impoverished by the lack of a physical possession (or our inability to obtain it), the item we seek is likely something we have projected a deeper need upon. The actual possession of it may help us feel better for a time, but the need or lack will return because we did not address the true source of the poverty. We can drive ourselves into bankruptcy trying to buy our way out of our incorrectly perceived needs. What is needed is seldom a new job, outfit, car, or partner, but a transformed perspective that allows us to recognize the deeper need beneath the surface need. And that deeper need is almost always spiritual in nature. We cannot, however, address spiritual poverty with physical objects.

In the *kingdom of heaven* there is enough of everything in sufficient quantities for everyone to have what they need and more. Poverty results from people taking, consuming, and/or hoarding more than they need out of greed or fear they may experience a lack in the future. It is a manifestation of one's lack of faith in a God who provides. The kingdom of heaven is not a physical location but a state of being. The kingdom of heaven is our current location and life-circumstance, but experienced through the lens of communal faith in a generous God. As

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such, when we give or receive, we draw from the abundance of God's resources instead of the relative scarcity of what we consider our own. When we live under a philosophy of scarcity, not having enough for one's needs is a perpetual concern. In contrast, life in the kingdom of heaven is one where a small amount of food feeds a multitude (see the stories of loaves and fishes), a tiny mustard seed becomes a giant bush providing shelter for many, and where a pinch of yeast added to flour provides a much larger quantity of bread. A *kingdom of heaven* mentality acts as a multiplier of unfathomable proportions. Living in the faith of a God who provides in abundance removes the need for greed and other faithless insecurities. Those with an excess of anything are willing to share because they know if and when they experience a lack, someone with an excess will provide.

Those who enter monasteries and convents take vows of poverty, meaning they purposefully renounce *personal* possessions and rely solely on the church or sponsoring organization to provide for their needs. A similar faith in God is required to enter the kingdom of heaven. Those actively seeking spiritual maturity find themselves redefining their needs, which usually shrink to a fraction of their former levels. I am told there is ecstatic joy in living free from the bonds of the seductive pull of materialism (I wish I knew this from personal experience). One recognizes the toll taken on our physical, mental, and emotional well-being by the extra possessions we accumulate, the ridiculous expectations we attempt to meet, and the air-brushed images of the *perfect life* we

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attempt to emulate. With a trusting faith, everything we need is made available to us. And when someone in need presents to us, everything necessary for us *and them* comes to us, so we are always able to be instruments of generosity.

Jesus had a gift for awakening folks to the depth of faith we all possess but seldom recognize or employ. He consistently told folks it was their faith that made them well. There is a healing, poverty-demolishing type of faith available to us, and *that* is the faith that opens the gates to the kingdom of heaven.

Chapter 4

Capitalism Run Amok

*For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have in abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken from them.*¹⁴

For the most part, I consider myself a *capitalist*, meaning I believe when the marketplace of products, services, and ideas allows unfettered interaction between suppliers and consumers, the price, quality, and quantity of products will be beneficial to buyers and sellers alike. Unfortunately, the truly *free marketplace* required for capitalism to benefit everyone is a myth – a *fairy-tale-like* theory finding its only reality in Economics textbooks. Although I think a capitalistic economy can be fair and just for most of

¹⁴ Matthew 25:29

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society, in terms of price, availability, and quality of products, it is highly susceptible to leaving others flailing in its wake. Today, we have an economy where market forces have been *tweaked* in ways that increasingly widen the wealth gap between the *haves* and *have-nots*. We are experiencing the decimation of the middle class, which was once the stabilizing majority, as more and more people are being relegated to the lower class, driven into poverty, or left homeless. Worse yet, the opportunities to move up from the lower classes are increasingly being squelched by the market. The current evolution of capitalism is artificially skewed to benefit the wealthy and has led to a situation where capitalism has run amok, further exacerbating the negative impacts of the new/old social pandemic.

The United States, in particular, is obsessed with individual and collective *productivity*, and capitalism *loves* productivity. In theory, the harder one works, the higher the quantity and/or quality of offerings they provide to the market, and the more they will reap its rewards, i.e., money, for their efforts. By contrast, in a purely communistic economy, workers are rewarded (paid) equally regardless of the quantity or quality of their work. Product prices and worker wages are set by the governing body. In pure capitalism, prices and wages are set by market forces based on their comparative value.

How we define productive work worthy of market rewards, however, is highly subjective. In general, the arts, entertainment, and sports, except at the very highest levels, are valued more as low-value, *game-like* activities than as

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productive work. Many workers providing critical services to the poor are also poorly compensated. Social workers, teachers, police and fire are examples where the provision of critical social needs is not always compensated in a manner reflective of the need or demand. Our focus on certain types of productivity is evident in the systems that have developed tying basic human needs with one's employment, the most glaring example being health insurance. If one cannot obtain health insurance through an employer, either because of being unemployed or working in a job where affordable health insurance is not offered, one often goes *un-or-underinsured*, seeks charity care, or tries to qualify for *Medicaid*, which is state-regulated insurance offered to the poorest in society. Unfortunately, Medicaid eligibility, coverages, providers, and reimbursements vary widely from state to state and are extremely restricted in many states. If a person is not productive in ways of value to the marketplace, their options for healthcare, housing, and other life-necessities are severely limited. Unless a person is employed by a company that pays a living wage and offers a decent benefit plan, they are almost certainly relegated to the lower levels of society. And capitalistic economies encourage that result, regardless of why a person is unable to obtain reasonable employment.

Some folks believe Jesus was a capitalist, meaning he taught that a person's worth is tied to their production, because of the parable of the *talents*¹⁵ found in Matthew

¹⁵ A *talent* was equivalent to about 15 years' wages for a worker.

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25:14-30, part of which is excerpted as the epigraph for this chapter. Based on Jesus' affinity for the poor and unflinching commitment to social justice, however, I read the parable more as a statement of how the economy actually operated in his day, instead of implying his support for an economy that left so few with so much and so many with so little. In that light, Jesus' parable was an eerie foreshadowing of the situation we're in today.

In a capitalistic economy, our feelings of self-worth, self-image, and identity easily become tied to what we produce, how much money we make, and the quantity and quality of our possessions. Our opinions of others are often based on similar measures. In his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*,¹⁶ author and priest Henri Nouwen named three lies we tell ourselves: 1. *I am what I have*; 2. *I am what I do*; and 3. *I am what other people say about me*. What is the value of one who cannot work because of a disability, or who cannot work full-time because of family obligations, or whose physical or mental health precludes steady employment, or whose abilities are not highly valued by the market? Are they worth-less? How should their "worth" be determined? These are questions that capitalistic societies struggle to address adequately.

A capitalistic economy can provide generous financial rewards for those who produce products or services that are valued by the marketplace, especially when those

¹⁶ Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Doubleday, 1992.

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offerings are in high demand and short supply. Capitalistic countries like the United States must constantly balance the parts of the economy allowed to operate freely in its largely-capitalistic markets with the parts removed from or heavily regulated and supported outside of the marketplace. As more of the economy is removed from free market forces by regulations, oversight, support, and taxes, more of its products and services are removed from the open interactions between buyers and sellers that often benefit consumers with improved products and lower prices. At least in theory...

When I say that capitalism has run amok in the United States, I mean that making more money in the marketplace used to be a means to an end, which is to say that one would strive to accumulate money for specific life-related purposes – to buy a home, save for a secure retirement, or to improve one’s lifestyle. For businesses, making a profit – the excess of income over expenses – allowed companies to replace aging equipment, increase employee salaries, or to expand or improve the products and services offered. There was a tangible purpose for making more money that directly corresponded to a person’s life-experience or a business’s purpose for existing. In recent decades, a novel purpose for making money has become increasingly evident – making money in order to make *even more* money. Making money became not just the means to an end, but the means *and* the end.

When Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, in 1859, he introduced theories that revolutionized the natural sciences with concepts that remain in common

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use today: *evolution*, *survival of the fittest*, and *natural selection*, to name a few. Thus began a time where science provided logic-based explanations about life – its beginnings, purpose, and propagation – than had previously been provided by religion. Although Darwin is said to have seen no conflict between his theories and a sovereign God, his ideas instigated a deep divide between science and religion that continues for many to this day, and both science and religion (and politics) are diminished as a result.

One of Darwin's observations was that in nature, the species' best suited to their environment were most likely to survive, reproduce, and perpetuate their existence, also known as the *survival of the fittest*. It was an impersonal, if observable, description of life in unregulated biomes. *Darwinism-run-amok* might be described as the belief that only the fittest *should* survive – that we should not interfere with the natural course of events to preserve less-fit species of plants and animals from extinction. In economic terms, Darwinistic capitalists might argue that unregulated financial markets are superior, even when they allow the richest in society to thrive as the poorest wither and die. The underlying assumption, of course, is that one's value in the marketplace is the sole determinant of one's value as a person. If we believe other factors are as or more relevant in determining a person's value, the economy must be regulated in ways that prevent the wanton degradation of the lower classes. And although our economy today is regulated, those regulations are woefully inadequate because the wealthy keep getting wealthier as the poor get poorer.

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Factual, scientific knowledge is useful for working with tangible projects like medical research, home-building, and space exploration; moral and spiritual considerations are useful when wading through intangible aspects of life like compassion, love, and inherent values. Science without compassion can become aloof and ruthless, while compassion without science can become abstract and unrealistic. We find our best and most balanced lives when drawing from and integrating both disciplines.

Underlying pure capitalism is the mistaken belief that more is always better, whether one is talking about money, possessions, power, or influence. Everything in a capitalistic economy becomes a competition where success is measured not simply by how *much* one has, but by how much *more* one has than others. If resources were unlimited, such an attitude would matter less. But critical resources – healthcare, housing, and food, to name a few – are limited, so when an economy is regulated in ways that allow some persons to continue accumulating resources far beyond their need while others must rely on charity and government welfare to barely scrape by, we know capitalism has run amok.

As noted earlier, the traditional reason for making more money is to be able to do something tangible to enhance one's life that might not otherwise be possible, like buying a home or saving for retirement. What has changed that has significantly reduced the numbers of people benefiting

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from capitalism has been the intent to make more money for the sole purpose of making more money. In other words, increasing the amount of money one controls has become a goal in itself – not to acquire or create anything worthwhile, but simply to make more money.

Some people mistake the purpose of banks as that of making money for its own purpose, but banks actually exist to loan money to individuals and businesses for life-specific purposes – to replace the family car or fund a business expansion. The product banks provide *is* the money needed to enhance people's lives, at a cost of course, just like any other business. The supply of money for banks to loan comes (in theory) from those who deposit their excess funds with the bank in return for interest paid from the profits generated by the lending of that money. The point is that traditional banks do not make money for the sole purpose of making money; rather, they make money as a means to the end of having money to loan to others for their tangible purposes. What follows is my overly simplified synopsis of how banking has changed.

The scope of banking has grown significantly with *investment banks* that specialize in providing large amounts of capital (money) to existing businesses that are expanding, as well as with *venture capitalists* that invest in those starting a new business who need money to get their business off the ground. Of course, all banks strive to maximize their chances of getting their money back with significant interest by weighing the risks with the possible rewards. Although these newer types of banks do not actually run the daily operations of the businesses they

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invest in, they often exercise significant pressure on those businesses to generate large profits, from which the investors draw a generous portion. This pressure can drive businesses into extreme income-enhancing and cost-reducing practices. But, in my opinion, where capitalism *really* runs amok is in *private equity*.

Private equity (PE) firms buy existing companies with the intent to sell them a few years later at a substantial profit. They do not *invest* in companies with a primary goal to maintain or enhance the products and services provided; they *take over* companies for the sole purpose of rapidly increasing their resale value. For example, some PE firms I have experience with operated under the expectation that the resale value of the companies they purchased would double every five years. In other words, if they bought a company for \$1 million in 2020, their over-riding intent would be to sell that company for at least \$2 million by 2025. These firms do not buy businesses because they have any expertise or particular interest in the actual products or services of the businesses. Rather, they buy companies they feel offer the best opportunity to dramatically increase in resale value in a short period of time, regardless of the impact on the product produced or the business's employees or customers. The primary ways to increase value are by increasing income or decreasing expenses, or both. The common methods of increasing income are by increasing prices or increasing sales, or both. The common methods of decreasing expenses are by lowering the costs of supplies or lowering the cost of employees, or both. The common methods of lowering employee costs are by

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reductions in salaries, benefits, hours, employee numbers, or all of the above. A particularly egregious variation of increasing the value of a purchased company is to buy a competitor, sell its assets, and shut it down. This practice often increases sales by reducing the options for consumers to purchase the product elsewhere.

A corporate intent to make reasonable and sustainable profits over the long-term is a good and necessary practice for businesses. Ditto for taking care of good employees. It serves the best interests of the company and its customers and employees alike. The relatively-recent corporate drive to make obscene profits over the short term is shameful, especially when it costs good people their jobs and/or benefits, reduces product quality, and/or increases consumer prices. That our politicians and regulatory agencies allow it, encourage it, or look the other way as it occurs is the height of short-sighted incompetence.

Before we point our judgmental fingers at corporate greed, however, we must first acknowledge that many of us *normal* citizens allow, encourage, look away from, and even demand such business practices.

In the previous section I shared my layperson's understanding of the evolution of society's money-handlers, from local banks to investment banks, venture capitalists, and private equity firms, each structured to make significantly greater amounts of money from the funds they invest – often with devastating consequences to

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workers, product quality and availability, and the overall rate of inflation. What began as a stabilizing cornerstone in the marketplace has become a ravenous beast, threatening to devour everything of value in its path. Similar to the steady progression of the effects of global warming, changes in the ways money is made and invested began in subtle, limited ways that are now exponentially more invasive. And we wonder who is to blame. Greedy corporate executives? Unscrupulous shareholders? Corrupt politicians? Inept regulators? Certainly there are guilty persons in those categories, but the folks who can most powerfully and quickly right this wayward ship are the average everyday consumers, small investors, and taxpayers. Like me. And like you. The ones we accuse with fingers of blame are, for the most part, merely responding to the behaviors of the rest of us based on our purchasing and investing decisions.

Most of us with money invested in mutual and other stock funds are supporting companies whose operations are harming our overall economy with short-sighted, often-harmful business practices. Especially at fault are those of us who do not monitor the companies in whom our funds are invested. Of course, we want to see the value of our accounts grow as quickly as possible, so we (or our investment advisors, acting on our behalf) invest in the funds increasing in value most quickly. And those funds primarily invest in companies whose value is projected to increase quickly, which is often private equity and others whose practices increase value without regard to the longer-term impacts on workers, consumers,

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product quality and availability, and overall rates of inflation. Because I have a few investment accounts for retirement, I am a person of privilege who can direct my funds toward companies I wish to see prosper and away from those I choose not to support. It requires some research on my part, and the rates of growth achieved will be impacted by my decisions. Regardless, if I am inattentive to what I allow to have done with the money I have to invest, I not only unwittingly support detrimental business practices, I benefit from them at the expense of others. So I share responsibility for our current mess; and if you have retirement or other stock accounts and don't know what you're invested in, so do you.

Several years ago, a financial advisor introduced me to *socially-responsible investing (SRI)*. These are mutual funds that invest in firms committed to ethical and socially-responsible business practices – those with policies and practices committed to sustainability, social justice, environmental impacts, and the betterment of society. Some research indicates the rate of return on SRI funds may be as little as a half-percent lower than for many popular non-SRI funds over the last five years. Alternatively, we can invest in businesses with a *B Corp Certification*, who are committed to (1) demonstrating high social and environmental performance, (2) being accountable to all their *stakeholders* (which includes employees, consumers, and other affected communities) and not just to their *shareholders* (owner/investors), and (3) transparency in how they perform against the *B Corp*

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standards.¹⁷ And there are other excellent options for supporting conscientious participants in the market. By making well-researched, conscious choices in our purchasing and investing behaviors we can reshape our economic environment.

As consumers, we normally seek the best product at the lowest price, whether we are buying groceries, a car, or investing for retirement. And the market responds accordingly – it supplies what we purchase. But the *downstream and/or hidden costs* and unintended consequences of our purchasing behaviors are seldom obvious. Consumer demand drives the market, and when we blindly support lowest prices, other areas of society must pay the balance because our decisions contribute to the rising rates of unemployment, inflation, and poverty. When we support companies who can offer cheaper prices because of careless business practices, we become co-conspirators in the resulting devastation. Outsourcing jobs to foreign companies where worker protections and wages are abysmal, purchasing materials from suppliers with similar practices, and cutting the numbers, salaries, and benefits of the local workforce may result in lower prices, but only when our purchasing decisions do not consider the costs beyond the list price.

The point is that uninformed consumers perpetuate destructive market practices. Those of us with investment accounts and those who are able to pay

¹⁷ <https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/certification>, accessed May 27, 2024.

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somewhat more for our products are in the position to support companies running their business in sustainable ways that provide wide-spread benefits to society. Once we make unethical business practices unprofitable, the market will abound with companies that provide good products at fair prices, treat their employees well, and support the communities that support them. And the unethical participants will wither on the vine.

Underlying the muck in which present-day capitalism is mired is the *Law of Supply and Demand*. This *law* is both the key to capitalism's downfall *and* its salvation. The law of supply and demand describes the marketplace as constantly balancing itself between what is demanded (being purchased) by consumers and what is made available at what price by suppliers. When a product is in low demand, suppliers reduce its production and lower its price since lower prices encourage consumers to purchase more. When a product is in high demand, manufacturers will either make more of it or suppliers will increase the price, or both, since higher prices discourage consumers from purchasing. That is a bare-bones description of a free market economy.

Well-intentioned government interventions often have serious, unforeseen consequences by focusing on only one part of the *supply-and-demand* equation. When conditions at one end of a closed system are changed, other parts of the system must adjust. For example, today's consumers are experiencing high inflation, meaning the

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prices for most products are rising faster than most incomes. The primary cause of high inflation is having too much money in circulation. Money, when present in abundance, decreases in value – meaning we cannot purchase nearly as much with our dollars as in times of lower inflation. Under the law of supply and demand, when *extra* money is available to consumers, they are better able to purchase products (for a time), resulting in increased demand, less supply, and *increased prices* to balance the supply with the demand, and inflation go up.

One government response to the financial difficulties caused by COVID pandemic was to send money directly to households – two checks of \$1400 each, if I remember correctly – which flooded the marketplace with *new* money. The result was increased demand, which gave a needed boost to the economy, but also resulted in higher prices and increased price inflation. While I do not question the need for government action in times of crisis, solutions like *stimulus checks* often end up worsening the problems for those struggling and benefiting those with no need of assistance. Similar proposals to *forgive* billions of dollars in student loans will also result in increased inflation, to the detriment of those struggling the most, which is not to say we should do nothing about student debt.

Flooding markets with money has dramatic impacts for both consumers and suppliers. The practice often provides short-term relief, which is why it's done as elections loom, but leaves many folks in even worse condition over the longer term. Looking at healthcare, the

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spread of health insurance coverage for increasing numbers of people, especially with the creation of Medicare in the 1960s, led to improved health for millions. At the same time, though, the flood of additional money into the healthcare system has consistently driven healthcare costs higher, well above the inflation rates for other services. As health insurance is now being withdrawn or reduced as an employee benefit, personal bankruptcies after medical procedures have skyrocketed because the uninsured cost of healthcare has grown out of proportion to the rest of the economy. A similar phenomenon has occurred in higher education with the increased availability of student loans. The additional money flooding into universities has resulted in more people going to college but has also caused the cost of a college education to consistently rise well above normal inflation rates, leaving millions with staggering debt when leaving school, with or without a degree. None of which is to say we shouldn't encourage access to healthcare and higher education, only that we should design more efficient and less destabilizing ways to assist.

Another area receiving a tremendous flood of additional dollars of late, with devastating consequences, is in politics. In 2010, a Supreme Court ruling (*Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission*) cleared the way for corporations and other outside groups to contribute unlimited amounts of money to elections as long as they do not directly coordinate with specific candidates. As serious money gushes from corporations, *super PACs*, anonymous individuals, and foreign entities, the diversity

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of views represented in Congress has become increasingly limited and polarized as the focus narrows to the issues of most importance to the small number of groups and individuals providing the majority of campaign dollars. House and Senate members spend up to *30 hours per week* in their party's call centers raising money. And make no mistake – the lust for money is bipartisan.

Timothy, a contemporary of the apostle Paul, wrote: “...the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil...”¹⁸ For politicians, corporations, and individuals, the love of money for money's sake corrupts moral standards. Piles of *new* (printed) currency are pumped into the economy each year, most of which is eventually siphoned off by insatiable investors, keeping inflation rates high and forcing greater numbers of vulnerable people into financial hardship, marginalization, and homelessness. And leaving future generations with an unfathomable national debt. This, indeed, is capitalism run amok.

Our current economic mess is largely a manifestation of the love of money for its own sake. The system rewards the rich by allowing the taking from the non-rich to make the rich even richer. This is abundantly evident in the ever-widening wealth gap between the rich and poor. It is evidenced in the wage chasm between those in the C-suites and the front-line workers. It is seen in the dramatic difference in health status between economic classes, the

¹⁸ 1 Timothy 6:10a

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deterioration of the middle class, and the quality of education received.

And it's all due to the love of money. Jesus' words, "*...for to all those who have, more will be given...*" are *not* a statement of God's will for the distribution of money but a statement of fact about human greed: "*...but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken from them.*"¹⁹ It is *not* God who takes from the poor and gives to the rich, it is us! The unjust economic system we have today has been fashioned by politicians, administered by bureaucrats, and sanctioned by the courts. The bureaucrats are controlled, at least in theory, by the politicians. The politicians, in theory, are controlled by the voters. In reality, however, the politicians, bureaucrats, and the capitalistic system are controlled by the primary funders of political campaigns, which are a handful of large corporations, *dark-money* donors, and foreign interests.

A birds-eye view of our 2024 tax rates, stripped of their complex exceptions and innumerable loop-holes, is telling. Income tax rates for individuals range from 10 to 37%, depending on one's net taxable income. The tax rate on corporations is a flat 21%. The rate on capital gains ranges from 0% to 20%. The lowest tax rates are reserved for capital gains, which come from the sale of assets – like stocks (which is the business of private equity). Corporations pay the next lowest tax rate and, coincidentally, can contribute unlimited amounts of money to influence elections, as can private equity, investment

¹⁹ Matthew 25:29

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banks, and venture capitalists. Once the personal income of a *single-filer* rises above \$47,150, they start being taxed at a higher rate than corporations, up to nearly twice as much. A generous benefit to those earning more than \$168,600 is not having to continue paying FICA (social security) taxes, which are 12.4% (half of which is paid by their employer). Not that many of us reading or writing this would know...

The point is that capitalism in its current iteration is broken. And the ones impacted most negatively are the increasing numbers on the lower rungs of the financial ladder. Although I am not a Donald Trump supporter, I understand the underlying frustration that drives many to him. He portrays himself as a savior and a reformer. He claims to be their *revenge* and *retribution*. It is a sad commentary that those we look to for relief, at least in the political realm, are the same ones gaining from the financial oppression of so many people. Republicans, Democrats, Biden, Trump, Schumer, Johnson, and more – all are united in benefitting from and allowing our capitalistic economy to devolve into a money-grubbing cesspool. And as a mostly unconscious consumer and investor, I am there with them, albeit many rungs lower.

A popular term a few years ago describes a condition endemic to many of us: *affluenza*. It combines *affluence* with *influenza* – privilege with illness, or the disease of privilege. Unfortunately, the suffering caused by affluenza is not born by those infected but by those who must live in its residue. The term also hints at *apathy*, as if feeling there is little to be done about it.

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Personally, I find the guidance from Jesus for this dilemma difficult, no doubt because I keep a foot in our corrupt economic system even as I pretend to pattern my life after his. He said, *“No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth;”*²⁰ and, *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures...where...thieves break in and steal;”*²¹ and *“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”*²² Jesus did not waste time railing against corruption in the Roman government; instead, he did what he could with what he had to ease the suffering it caused. And I believe he invites us to do the same as we strive to deal with this new/old social pandemic of poverty, marginalization, and homelessness. Be an informed voter, investor, and consumer. And ease suffering where we are able. Jesus warned, *“...where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*²³ We can begin by asking ourselves, “Where do my actions show my treasure to be?”

²⁰ Matthew 6:24

²¹ Matthew 6:19

²² Mark 12:17

²³ Matthew 6:21

Chapter 5

Marginalization

*...the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.*²⁴

The epigraph contains a portion of Jesus' answer to two disciples of John the Baptist who were sent to determine if Jesus was the Messiah they had been waiting for. Jesus provides a list of some of the impacts of his ministry, all of which are consistent with what the Old Testament prophets identified as hallmarks of the Messiah: the blind see, the lame walk, the unclean are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead live again, and the poor are comforted. These afflictions were among those that *marginalized* people in Jesus' day, along with the orphans, widows, those

²⁴ Luke 7:22

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possessed by demons, and other circumstances that distinguished them from the societal majority. They were uncomfortably different. Most folks didn't know what to do for or with them, so they ostracized them. Then, as now, those with an awkward trait were *marginalized* – treated as *less-than* – and prevented from full participation in the normal activities of their society. Today, we see marginalization occurring as a result of one's skin color, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, political or religious affiliation, personal hygiene, native language, mental or physical health, and countless other characteristics by which people differ from each other. It is as if being included into the life of a community requires uniformity instead of communities finding unity in diversity. The life and teachings of Jesus focused on the marginalized of his society, intending to show that regardless of one's outward appearance or life-situation, there is always a place of welcome in the kingdom of God.

In my hometown, there is a church on a main thoroughfare with a sign on which they often display marginalizing statements consistent with their religious views. On a recent Saturday, the community's annual Gay Pride Parade was occurring just down the street from this church. They chose to proclaim "*Perversion is not anything to be proud of*" on their sign, aimed at supporters of the LGBTQ+ community as they celebrated Gay Pride month. Apparently, the parade and other Pride events offended that particular church's beliefs about God and were contrary to their interpretation of a handful (six) of controversial passages of scripture. They left the message

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up for long enough for those with a different view to spray-paint over the words “*not anything*,” making the sign read, “*Perversion is to be proud of*.” Within a couple of days, the church had cleaned the sign and reposted their original message. This was an example of people with different understandings marginalizing others by trying to make them look bad, stupid, uninformed, or otherwise contemptible. While I do not agree with the church’s message, and while I believe those types of displays cast an unfortunately wide and misleading net of closed-minded judgmentalism over *all* churches, I also recognize that defacing the sign did nothing to encourage greater tolerance by either group toward the other. In fact, the dueling actions likely only entrenched both sides even deeper into their belief that the other side *should* be marginalized. Personally, I believe public displays of prejudice and marginalization, whether along a busy road or in a social media post, say more about the insecurities of the one posting the message than about the cause, position, or people with whom they differ.

We marginalize others because we feel threatened. The perceived and/or real threats may be financial, as when accommodating someone might increase taxes; moral, as when the behavior of another violates ones core beliefs; physical, as when we fear another might cause physical harm; or simply when we find the way someone smells, dresses, talks, looks, or behaves offensive. When we point fingers of unworthiness at others it can make us feel stronger, justified, in control, or superior. Marginalization, however, is also sometimes an act of compensation for

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what we fear, usually subconsciously, is an undesirable trait in ourselves. Our *shadow self* – that part of us we try to repress and hide from others – is often revealed by what we oppose, particularly in what we *strongly* oppose. For example, psychologists have long postulated that homophobic attitudes have their root in doubts about one's own sexual leanings. An early psychiatrist, Carl Jung, is credited with pointing out that anything that irritates us about others can lead us to a better understanding of ourselves. When someone or something annoys us in a significant way and we fail to first seek the source of the irritation within ourselves, we are prone to mistakenly marginalizing that other person or issue in some way.

If marginalization is a reaction to perceived external threats, then its antidote requires internal work by recognizing we are *all* among the imperfect, walking wounded trying to navigate our way through this life. When we marginalize others, we perpetuate the marginalization of the parts of ourselves crying out for acknowledgement, and no healing occurs. We simply pass along our prejudices to others, particularly to our children. The life and teachings of Jesus encourage us to constantly widen our circle of acceptance, both of ourselves *and* others.

Marginalization is ultimately about power and exclusion. Those in power are able to marginalize those without it, and they often do. And by marginalizing those with little power, the powerful gain even more power at the expense

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of the marginalized from whom it is taken. Of course at some point, as has happened throughout human history, the powerless reach a critical mass sufficient to overthrow the powerful and force a redistribution of influence, at least until the new power group is overthrown. But the wheels of *karma* turn insufferably slowly, at least for the marginalized. This destructive pattern of exchanging power, influence, and oppression – having it one day, losing it the next – is an identifying characteristic of the new/old social pandemic. Those who have want more; those who have little have even that taken from them – like a *black hole*, the wealthy suck everything within reach into themselves, without satisfaction.

Unfortunately, the desires for power and influence, like the desires for money and possessions, are insatiable because there is no amount that feels secure or sufficient. In organizations, the higher one rises, the greater the number of people seeking to unseat and replace you. There is a persistent anxiety among top executives that keeps them looking over their shoulders for those wanting what they have. And the paranoia is not limited to businesses but is also rampant in politics, churches, and even families. The reign of the *alpha* tends to be short. Under the new/old social pandemic, those looking over their shoulders are those of us who live lifestyles of excess, who hoard what others desperately need, and who squander the natural resources future generations must have in order to survive.

The marginalization of others is a favored tool for collecting, justifying, and increasing one's hold on power

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and influence. For decades, even centuries after slaves were freed in the aftermath of the Civil War, the rights granted to black persons lagged behind those of their white counterparts. Women were not allowed full citizenship rights, like the ability to vote, until the 1920s, or to have a credit card in their name until the 1970s. Gay persons were regularly denied housing, employment, and other basic necessities. Even today, with many legal protections in place to help prevent overt discrimination, examples persist of folks being marginalized in ways that ought not occur.

Marginalization often reveals itself in our efforts to make others look evil, bad, or threatening. We may marginalize others in an attempt to hide what we subconsciously fear may be true of ourselves. If we refuse to accept a personal trait in our inner life, we are unlikely to allow it in lives external to ours either. The Bible is a common instrument of marginalization since one can always find passages that imply just about anything on the spectrum of human appearance and behavior is contrary to God's will. To do so, of course, one must pick and choose selected passages from the Bible and remove them from their context. The Bible as a whole, tells the story (from many viewpoints) of a God relentlessly striving to bring *all* people into God's kingdom. Taken in its entirety, the Bible is *not* a tale of marginalization or exclusion but of welcome and accommodation.

The oppressive cycle of this social pandemic, as old as time itself, *can* be broken, but it requires those in power to agree to and lead a voluntary redistribution of their

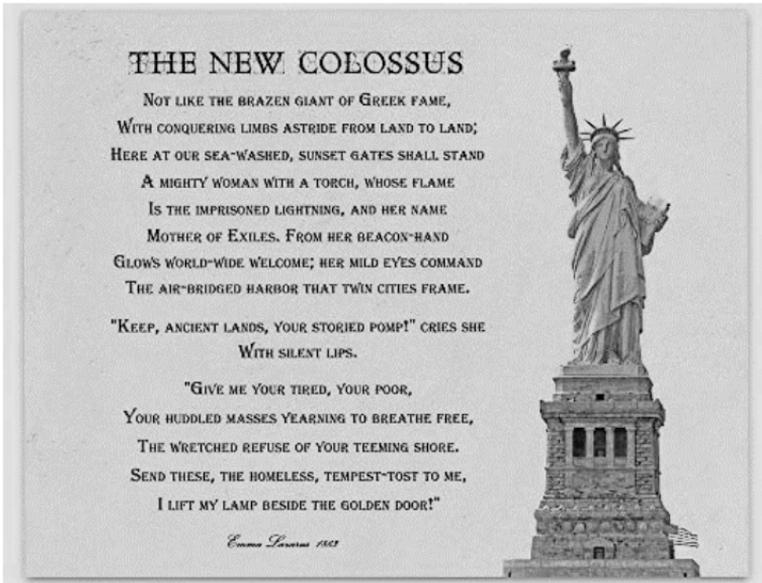
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power and wealth, allowing the marginalized to rise to positions of equality. Picture the scales of justice being equalized into balance. In other words, the powerful must willingly give up that which others seek from them, thus lowering their material standard of living in order to allow the standard for others to rise. It is nearly impossible to accomplish, however, because power and possessions are seductive. Many of the wealthy fear that sort of change could drive them into poverty or homelessness, but that is more likely to occur when they resist until a rebellion occurs and their excess is forcibly removed from them. When justly distributed, there are plenty of resources for everyone to live comfortably.

The gospels describe several instances when Jesus restores the sight of a blind person. We assume it was physical sight being restored, and perhaps it was. But there is a more wide-spread form of blindness that Jesus attempted to heal too, which is blindness to the plight of others, particularly the marginalized. It is akin to the deafness of those who can hear, but won't. It is related to those who are dead inside to the pained cries of their neighbors. These allegorical afflictions are rampant today and manifestations of the new/old social pandemic. The Bible says we were created in the image and likeness of God, so before we marginalize another we should ask, "Which of these images of God should I marginalize today?"

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In 1886, France gifted the *United States of America* the *Statue of Liberty* in honor of its 100th birthday. The American poet, Emma Lazarus, wrote a sonnet, *The New Colossus*²⁵, to raise money for the pedestal onto which the statue would be



installed. The statue represents and the sonnet captures the vision from which the United States was birthed – not as a gun-toting warrior staunchly defending its borders, but a strong, single-minded Mother standing tall with a beacon, an invitation to come home.

As I write this, the United States prepares to celebrate the 248th anniversary of its declared independence from Great Britain. Consistent with this book's theme of *marginalization*, it is telling to review the nature of the liberty projected to its citizens and the world

²⁵ *The New Colossus*, a poem by Emma Lazarus, written in 1883 and installed on the Statue of Liberty in 1903.

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by and memorialized in this most recognized symbol of freedom. And it seems an apt time to reassess our actions at home and abroad accordingly.

A *colossus* is something or someone of great size, influence, or ability. But *The New Colossus* does not only refer to a huge statue and a large nation, but to an audacious experiment in democracy – a government of, by, and for the people – built not by brute strength but by welcoming all, including the outcast, and becoming an indispensable refuge. From its beginnings, however, our nation has too quickly squandered its copious resources on violent, oppressive acts that belie the standard Lady Liberty sets. Her name is *Mother of Exiles*. Her lamp is held high, sending its beacon of hope to those in need, wherever they may be. There is no time for “*storied pomp*,” she declares, for there is work to be done. “*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...*” she cries. She welcomes “*the wretched refuse...the homeless, the tempest-tost* (those suffering storms of adversity)” for her home is spacious, her resources plentiful, and there is food enough for those who hunger – both for physical nourishment and for freedom.

Lady Liberty’s vision is strongly reminiscent of that of Jesus of Nazareth, is it not? He describes the kingdom of God as welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and healing the sick. He equates the way we treat those in dire circumstances with the way we treat him: “*...just as you did...to one of the least of these...you did to*

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*me.*²⁶ Lady Liberty says, “*Send these...to me.*” Our country’s founding vision, as with Christianity, is based on maternal nurturance, not paternal domination. Its lasting success will come through love and generosity, not violence and exclusion. It seeks peace by establishing bonds of *interdependence* among peoples, not by the threat of military destruction.

The *American Dream* symbolized by Lady Liberty was to welcome and provide for the exiles, immigrants, the poor and homeless: the *marginalized*. Today, some label these instead as criminals, job-stealers, murderers, rapists, terrorists, societal moochers, and other descriptors no loving mother would use for one in crisis. Yes, there are bad actors among them, as there are among those with citizenship, but they are a small element. The rest are simply seeking a better life, as was the case for our ancestors. Of course, the sheer number of immigrants seeking refuge taxes our resources. But the problem is not a shortage of resources but poor prioritization and distribution of the abundance we have available. When we spend excessively on objectives that exclude and oppress others, we are unable to attend adequately to the *tired, poor*, and those *yearning to breathe free*, both within and outside our borders. Many seeking entry look, act, and believe differently than we do – just as our ancestors did to those on this land before them. It is time to reestablish our internal and external relationships based on nurturing others, building reconciling bridges, and assuring that

²⁶ Matthew 25:40

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everyone has adequate resources to meet their basic human needs. No military power can provide or prevail over that sort of strength. *That* is the path laid out by Lady Liberty, and it remains the sole path to freedom and justice for all.

There are certain categories of difference among people that few would argue are regular targets of marginalization today, including persons of color, LGBTQ+ folks, and those with obvious physical challenges. There are other traits with less obvious, more obscure, or intermittent impacts that may make them targets of occasional marginalization. There is also a seemingly unlikely group, a particularly vocal schism of which is claiming marginalization, which is the white, heterosexual male. This cross-section of humanity has arguably been the most powerful and privileged of any in history. As a member of this cohort, I cringe at the thought that any would suggest that we are among the oppressed and/or deserving of accommodation. There are important reasons, however, why I believe the complaints of this group have some basis in reality and should not be ignored.

Women, persons of color, those with non-heterosexual preferences, and many others find it obscenely audacious of such a group to consider itself marginalized in any sense. After all, this is the group that has made the rules, built and maintained the systems, and fought to maintain the *status quo* that has caused the oppression of millions throughout the 248 year existence of this country. The most radical and vocal among them

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today are labeled *white supremacists*, *white nationalists*, and are often purveyors of *Christian Nationalism* and other exclusionist worldviews, behaving as if they are heirs to some sort of divinely-bestowed superiority or inherent entitlement.

But there is an oft-overlooked difference between white, heterosexual men and most other marginalized groups, which has to do with where they've been. Most white, heterosexual males have actually experienced privilege, either for themselves or for the family in which they were raised. They either *know* or *knew* what it is/was to never experience food insecurity or wonder where they would sleep at night. They know what it was like to have received higher wages for similar jobs, to be arrested and jailed at lower rates for similar crimes, and to have been able to live comfortably in any neighborhood they could afford. This slice of humanity is fighting to either *retain* or *regain* the benefits of privilege, while the marginalized others seek to gain something they've never had.

One of the self-satisfying benefits of privilege is knowing one is doing better than others. There is an arrogant sense of entitlement and personal superiority accompanying privilege that dissipates as the lives and lifestyles of others approach levels equal to or higher than theirs. Whether we believe certain of these white men are *actually* being marginalized, we need to acknowledge that many of them *believe* it to be true and are acting accordingly. The fact is that greater numbers from this group are finding themselves un- or underemployed, on welfare, relying on food banks or other charities, and unable to

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secure healthcare and other services for themselves and their families. As glaring evidence of this, look at the rising numbers of homeless veterans. *From their perspective*, much has been unjustly taken *from* them and given to others, and they are not happy about it. If they did not perceive the primary redistribution of resources as being taken from their pockets and threatening their lifestyles, they might not be so angry. This combination of factors is particularly dangerous because it provides the conditions that breed terrorists. Donald Trump and his MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement finds much support from these folks, not because he is one of them, but because he offers (at least verbally) what they seek: revenge, retribution, and a return to the “good old days.” The violent actions at the nation’s Capitol on January 6, 2021, foreshadowed what some in this group are capable of.

The marginalization of many white, heterosexual men is a new challenge, regardless of whether one believes it to be legitimate. Of course, many other white, heterosexual males – those *most* responsible for the systems that determine the distribution of societal benefits – are prospering, with some seeing their wealth increase exponentially. These are the ones still in power and striving to distance themselves from the struggling masses they increasingly oppress. They are politicians, yes, but most operate in less visible roles as heads of businesses, banks, private equity firms, and political action committees (PACs) directing the actions that lead to the types of marginalization that those of less influence rail against.

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A key element of marginalization is the *perceived control* one has over the trajectory of their life-experience. Most marginalized folks are starting low and striving for upward movement. Masses of white, heterosexual males perceive their life trajectory as on a downward slope, steadily descending because of forces beyond their control. It is a different manifestation of marginalization, but an increasingly important one to recognize and address.

The term *privilege* implies an *advantage* over others. Privileged folks are not just the wealthy or those able to do or buy whatever they desire. I also associate privilege with *middle class* and stability. Being part of the middle class typically signifies modest home ownership, an adequate and steady income, health insurance, paid time off, and some financial cushioning for unexpected expenses. Being part of the middle class equates to a stable and predictable, if modest lifestyle. Certainly, some members of marginalized groups qualify as middle class or higher, but the arguable majority of those traditionally making up the middle class have been white, heterosexual males and their families. Therefore, as the middle class shrinks, this typically privileged group is hit hard, at least proportionally.

My first work experience illustrates privilege, although I would not have considered myself privileged at the time. I began working at 14 and have been employed essentially everyday since. I worked in custodial services, fulltime in the summers and parttime during my high school years. The pay was minimum wage, and the work

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was not glamorous, but it was steady and the paychecks dependable. I was able to buy my own car in high school and have other *luxuries* many peers could only admire. It also helped me begin my adult life with resources and experiences others did not have. And how did I get my first job? My mom's cousin's husband (also a white, heterosexual male) was the director of maintenance for the local school district. Without that connection, I would not have (1) known of the opportunity, or (2) been offered the job. *That* is an example of privilege that, while unglamorous, gave me an early advantage over others and a head-start into adulthood.

The instability experienced by marginalized folks is perennially unsettling – not knowing if there will be enough money for rent, gas, utilities, and food, let alone for a car repair or medical bill. It is little wonder that rates of anxiety and depression have skyrocketed. I grew up lower middle class, but we were never (to my knowledge) in danger of not eating or having the water shut off or being evicted. The type of white, heterosexuals I perceive as the new, marginalized class grew up with stability, but have since been forced into the instability typical of other marginalized groups.

Another significant difference with this group is how some of them respond to their life-situation. This observation is anecdotal and stereotypical, but it seems at least partially accurate to me. The violent assault and murder incidents among most marginalized minorities tend to be one-on-one, or one small *gang* against another. The perpetrators of mass shootings or high-profile killings,

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however, tend to be frustrated, white, heterosexual males. Minorities usually use fists, knives, or handguns; whites use assault rifles. Minorities may kill or harm a particular person over a disagreement. Whites kill people they do not know for dramatic effect. We hear sad stories of their being bullied or raised by a single parent, but whites do not experience such developmental challenges at rates greater than others. Some, however, choose to express their dissatisfaction very differently and on a much larger scale.

While I believe programs like *Affirmative Action*, anti-discrimination regulations, and other types of preferential treatment arrangements are necessary to help compensate for unfair, systemic advantages that conspire against opportunities for certain groups, I also believe we need to be mindful of who and what gets sacrificed in order to equalize opportunities. Where possible, public responses should aim to increase the limited availability of good jobs, college admission slots, and other opportunities for advancement instead of disallowing some deserving folks in order to make room for others. Where sacrifices must be made, they should *not* be ones that lift those on the lower socio-economic rungs at the expense of others on the lower socio-economic rungs. Forcing more middle class folks downward in order to raise others to a mutually lower-class existence simply creates more marginalization and instability. It also widens the already vast chasm between the haves and have-nots. Marginalized people have every right to be angry and demand changes, but policy-makers, business owners, and others with power

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and resources must first distribute from *their* excess, not from those whose life-experience is already tenuous.

Chapter 6

Immigration

*...I was a stranger and you did not welcome me...Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.*²⁷

In previous chapters I have explored a few significant manifestations of the new/old social pandemic. Thus far I focused on *homelessness* and *marginalization* and now move to *immigration*. Each is a social issue nearly as old as humanity itself but now emerges with an unprecedented intensity, spreading as steadily and widely as an infectious disease with no vaccine or easy cure. I think, perhaps, even more important than how society reacts to these types of social problems is the seriousness with which we engage the

²⁷ Matthew 25:43,45

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issues and possible responses as individuals. In other words, these are obviously societal problems, but there are also personal choices and spiritual implications involved in how we think and talk about them. At one extreme we can try to ignore them and pretend they do not exist. At the other extreme we can uproot ourselves from our current life and go to an infected person or area, roll up our sleeves, and dedicate ourselves to one-on-one deeds of mercy. Most of us exist somewhere between the extremes. Jesus' words in this chapter's epigraph from Matthew 25, however, warn against the extreme of pretending the problems do not exist or that these are only problems *out there* somewhere. What we do to the *least* in our lives is what we do to him. How we think about the challenges of homelessness, marginalization, and immigration is equally a material *and* a spiritual concern, both personally and communally.

Immigration is a volatile issue in the United States and elsewhere. Immigration policy and how best to handle the multitudes seeking entry into our country is the source of much division and heated debate – which will only intensify as this November's (2024) elections approach. Some migrants are seeking asylum from civil wars, drug or human trafficking, and other types of on-going violence that victimizes innocent persons simply seeking a peaceful existence for themselves and their families. Others hope for opportunities to improve their life-trajectory that are not available in their homeland. It is difficult to claim these as unworthy purposes to seek a fresh start in the United States. And as legal options diminish and/or require too

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many years to accomplish or too much red-tape to successfully navigate, illegal modes of entry and residence become increasingly attractive.

If we allow the “illegal” nature of some migration attempts to dominate our personal reasoning on the topic, we risk earning the same criticisms Jesus waged against the scribes and Pharisees, who focused on the *letter* of religious law at the expense the *spirit* of the law. Jesus preached love, not lawful compliance, even when loving action conflicted with the law. Immigration is infinitely more than a legal issue, although the laws adopted around it are clearly important and impactful. In other words, as Christians, I don’t believe we can automatically dismiss the needs of those who have crossed our borders “illegally” and demand they be identified and swiftly deported. While there are examples of bad actors trying to escape law enforcement for crimes committed in their home countries, or those smuggling illegal drugs across the border, or sex traffickers seeking new markets, we cannot allow ourselves to assume the worst before hearing the stories and situations. Regardless, if we claim Jesus of Nazareth as our model for living, we cannot reject someone because they have done something illegal or immoral in their past. In doing so, we reject Jesus, too.

Immigration processes into the United States, as they currently exist, serve no one well and are in desperate need of rebirth. Necessary resources for receiving and processing legal immigration requests are severely lacking, as are identification and tracking mechanisms for those crossing the border in non-legal ways. The resources of

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states and service organizations where migrants tend to congregate are stretched to the breaking point. Innocent foreigners risking everything they have for a better, safer life are being held in concentration camps in Mexico or sent back to the conditions they sought refuge from or are being forced to live an *illegal* existence within our borders and in constant fear of being discovered and deported. It is no way to live, and it is no way for Christians to treat other children of God.

It seems to me our failure to establish a reasonable, compassionate, and fair immigration process results from our propensity to treat our difficult challenges as material problems and ignoring their underlying spiritual foundations. Our standard answer for material problems is to throw money at them, which may calm their intensity for a time but does nothing to address the underlying problem. Spiritually, we know we are to welcome the stranger, give to the poor, and have compassion for the suffering. If we begin with that as a foundation, what sort of immigration solutions might emerge?

The volatility of the issue of immigration in the United States (US) today is fueled by numerous fears: fear that we are providing safe harbor for criminals, fear that various resources needed by immigrants will become unavailable for citizens, and fear that immigrants will take our jobs or drive down wages by working for less than citizen workers. The common element in these factors is *fear*. And welcoming immigrants is not without risk – look at the fate

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of this land's indigenous folks during the European invasion of the 15th to 19th centuries. Knowing the US is a nation of immigrants is not comforting to many people when they consider what they believe is at risk. For me, my paternal and maternal great-grandparents immigrated from Germany and Ireland, respectively. While I have always considered myself *American*, I am still a descendant of immigrants in search of a better life – as are the vast majority of us.

The overriding concern for most folks is not about the risks of welcoming immigrants but is over what we fear we're putting at risk. Is it our wealth? Our comfortable lifestyle? Our security? Particularly for those of us claiming to be followers of Jesus the Christ, we forget that those are not legitimate reasons to deny helping others who are suffering. Others around the world desperately need what we have in abundance. Being willing to share our abundance can be frightening, difficult, and sometimes undesirable, yes, but not acceptable. Earthly wealth, comfort, and security are transient states and are not anything Jesus sought for himself or his followers. The wealth, comfort, and security offered in the Christian faith are not of the earth anyway. Who are we to believe we deserve resources beyond our need when other children of God suffer without them? Are we more deserving because we were lucky enough to be born in a land of copious resources? Are we fighting for a *status quo* that we have neither a right to demand nor the ability to retain?

We should not confuse the *American Dream* with the Christian life because they have little in common. Some

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act as though America is the new Israel in the sense of its citizens being the modern-day *chosen people* of God. They consider the US land as the new *Promised Land*. One does not need to dig deeply into Jewish history to understand the ridiculousness of those fantasies. Much of the Bible tells of immigrants seeking asylum in a new, safer homeland that offers the opportunity for a better life. They settle and they move; they are oppressed and they are freed; they gather and they are dispersed. If there is a lesson in Jewish history for those of us in the US it is that the material stability of nations and peoples is transitory. All earthly kingdoms fall, as will our current one. Our very comforts and abundance will be our undoing, as has happened in every age and civilization preceding ours.

Realizing the *American Dream* involves accumulating earthly comforts, but the Christian life is about awakening to our Oneness with God and all of creation, easing the suffering of others, and releasing our attachments to earthly comforts. Owning a single-family home or having food in abundance is not evil of itself – except when others are living unhoused and underfed. My wife and I live in a large home on a 5-acres – enough to house and support dozens of folks elsewhere, so I am not accusing anyone of something I am not guilty of myself. My hope is to make us all consciously aware of how much we have to spare without threat to our happy, comfortable existence. And it is that excess and our desperate attempts to retain it in the face of the desperate needs of others that will bring about our demise – maybe not in this generation, but soon.

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We can learn from water which, when gathering in excess, flows to the lowest point. No obstacle, no matter how strong, stands for long against the patient power of water on the move. Like lightening traversing the shortest path to the ground, it is relentless. The poor, the homeless, the marginalized, the asylum-seekers are the rivers of today and make no mistake, they will gain power as they grow in numbers, and every wall erected to separate them from the excess food in our freezers, the extra beds in our homes, and the trillions of idle dollars hoarded into banks and investment houses will crumble until those excess resources are united with the needs they were intended to serve.

The sooner we ease our grasp on our excesses and share generously, the sooner we will lessen the likelihood of their being forcibly removed from us in ways we would not choose. The power of the immigrant's need is greater, physically and morally, than our power to hoard.

The current uproar over immigration is enflamed by frustration and fear. There is frustration over the current processes and resources available to deal with the large numbers of people seeking to immigrate into the United States in an efficient, humane, and compassionate manner. And there is fear over the unknown impact of allowing tens of millions of *seekers-after-a-better-life* into our country. Both frustration and fear are reactions to times of significant change, individually and collectively, but neither is productive or helpful in addressing a crisis in a reasonable

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way. Frustration and fear are symptoms, not pathways forward, yet some confuse being fearful or posting one's frustrated opinion on social media with actually doing something useful. There is a tremendous amount of energy consumed by our fears and frustrations that, if directed in productive ways, could help us accommodate our challenges more quickly and effectively. Much of the energy expended through fear and frustration is emotional, which often pits people who should be on the same side of an issue against each other, dividing against instead of uniting toward a common effort. We are witnessing this spectacular waste of oxygen in our political discourse, in our homes, and even in our churches. We point fingers of blame at the brothers and sisters we should be working with to meet our challenges in ways beneficial to the common good.

The Christian religion has much to say about fear and frustration. The most frequently repeated command in the Bible is “*Do not fear,*” or some variation of that sentiment. It warns that giving in to fear does not help us move forward into and through a crisis or change. Rather, fear tends to stop us in place or cause us to retreat, even as the crisis grows in severity or the change moves ahead without us. Courage is not so much the absence of fear as the determination to face our challenges in spite of our fear. So the culprit is not necessarily a *concerned* fear, which can serve as an instructive goad to action, but a *paralyzing* fear. Familiar manifestations of fear are *worry* and *anxiety*, both of which result from a lack of faith – faith in God, in others, and in ourselves. Jesus said, “...do not worry about

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your life...or about your body...”²⁸ He continues, “...can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”²⁹ He concludes, “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”³⁰ The message should be clear: worrying and being anxious or overly fearful is neither helpful nor healthy.

Frustration grows out of impatience. Frustration may manifest because something is not happening as quickly as we feel it should, an action is occurring that we do not support, or from feelings that we are unsupported or marginalized. A common reaction to frustration is to find someone to blame, someone or some group of someones who are too *stupid* to see what appears obvious to us. We forget that we do not do life alone – ever, not even for a moment. Our lives are the natural outgrowth of our yesterdays, and our experiences are forever shaped, molded, and transformed by the evolving energies and influences of those around us. Inherent to the human condition is the illusion that we are separate from everything and everyone else, which is also the affliction that most inhibits our progression toward becoming our most complete and true selves. Even remote islands are inseparably connected to every other land mass on earth, but we can never discover the connectedness without exploring beneath the surface. The same is true of our

²⁸ Matthew 6:25

²⁹ Matthew 6:27

³⁰ Matthew 6:34

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souls. Our life-experiences are a *gestalt* of *all* life-experiences, past and present, across the street and across the globe, within which we participate, willingly or unwillingly, helpfully or destructively. Hard as we try, we do not control the flow of experiences – we only control our reactions and responses to them. Which, in the end, is the work for which we are called and that is uniquely ours to do.

Immigration and the resulting merging of races and cultures has given us everything that we celebrate about this life and land today. Some believe we can secure the status quo by denying or rejecting the plight of immigrants. But we cannot. The *status quo* is an illusion and is less desirable than death, because at least death leads to new life. The *status quo* only leads to stagnation. Immigration expands our life-experience with diversity and newness. It did when my great-grandparents entered this land 150 years ago, and it does today. Mistreating immigrants dishonors our heritage and ignores the teachings of Jesus.

While the spiritual/religious part of me recognizes the importance of caring for those less fortunate than me, the logical/practical part of me questions how such caring can be done in an impactful way and how effective the efforts of one person – me – will ever be against the magnitude of issues like homelessness, marginalization, and immigration. As I read the words of Jesus recorded in the gospels, I can rationalize that he spoke of caring for the *foreigner*, as in caring for someone with immediate needs who has no

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family or friends nearby, and not necessarily allowing an immigrant the full benefits of citizenship into one's country. One can argue that Jesus taught that we should not withhold acts of mercy – addressing the immediate needs of others – and not necessarily that we should take responsibility for accepting suffering persons into our communities as permanent residents. Yet, this justification rings hollow for me. I believe Jesus cared much more for the person than their race, ethnicity, or nationality, not to mention than our material comfort and stability.

It seems to me that Jesus addresses what we as *individual* Christians – as members of the larger body of Christ – can and should do apart from what the nation we are a part of decides. In other words, the question is not “What should the US do about its immigration mess?”, but “What should *I* do about the immigration mess?” The immensity of the larger problem is beyond our personal ability to resolve, but that does not excuse us from doing *something*. Easing the suffering of one person may do little to help the millions of others in need, but it is still easing the suffering of *someone*. Identifying and accepting personal responsibility for what we are capable of offering is a spiritual issue and requires focusing on what we can reasonably do and not comparing that with the magnitude of what needs to be done. Regardless of whether we believe in open or closed borders, which is a national decision, we can still find *something* we are able and gifted to do to help ease the suffering. As a society, we have allowed the treatment of immigrants to devolve into a political cesspool of ineptitude instead of recognizing it as

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an issue about the humane treatment of our brothers and sisters from other parts of the globe.

Of course, we should also examine the conditions that cause people to *want* or *need* to leave their homeland and immigrate to the US. We know migration is a difficult, dangerous, uncertain, and expensive endeavor for many, so something at home must be intolerable enough to make the attempt worth the risk. We know many are trying to escape political unrest, gang violence, drug and human trafficking, civil wars, and other abysmal conditions that make living a normal life nearly impossible. Are there diplomatic and/or political actions we can take to help stabilize volatile conditions elsewhere? Certainly, there are government and non-profit organizations working on those issues but given the dramatic increase in immigrants seeking entry to the US, those efforts appear to be inadequate, outdated, or both.

What sorts of solutions might emerge from looking at immigration as a spiritual challenge instead of a legal or material crisis? If our first priorities were to *welcome the stranger*, *give to the poor*, and *have compassion for the suffering*, how might we change our handling of immigrants? If we saw the faces and heard the stories of the individual souls seeking entry instead of lumping them into a giant mass of troublemakers threatening to take what we think belongs to us, what would we do differently? If we saw the face of Jesus in the faces of immigrants (see Matthew 25:31-56), how might that alter our view of whether we can and should help them? If we were to face a personal choice either to leave our homeland or to have our children

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abducted by gangs, trafficked as sex objects, or killed in the crossfire of a civil war, which would we choose? Assuming our choice is to leave home, how would we hope to be treated by the country in which we sought refuge? If we begin with the assumption that those seeking refuge for legitimate reasons can and should find a way into our country, perhaps we would focus on ways to welcome and integrate them into society, making changes to our lives and lifestyles as required, instead of making excuses and erecting new barriers to keep them out. The social pandemic of immigration is not relenting, and we should be directing our efforts toward humane integration and away from inhumane denial.

Chapter 7

The New/Old Social Pandemic (Reprise)

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*³¹

The pandemic at the root of homelessness, marginalization, and migration woes differs from what we typically consider a *pandemic*. For one, this is a *social* ill and not a *medical* affliction. It does not infect through the air, by physical touch, or the exchange of body fluids. Wearing masks and avoiding crowds will not alleviate its spread. There is no vaccine to control it, nor will a cure be developed by traditional scientific

³¹ Luke 10:27

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research. The genesis of this pandemic is in our national DNA but cannot be detected by medical diagnostics. There are no gene mutations that cause it or that increase one's susceptibility to being victimized by it. Regardless, its invasive roots permeate our personal beliefs and social structures under the guise of compassion, public welfare, and even religion.

This plague is not caused by a foreign invader entering our bodies but by *the absence of the conscious, spiritual discernment of our inescapable interconnectedness*. Unfortunately, spiritual matters are not identifiable by the scientific method, which is the preferred method to deal with pandemics. It is not that anything has entered into or been taken from us; it is that we are not taught how or encouraged to allow our inherent compassion for others to emerge – not as an occasional charitable impulse but as a pervasive commitment to *self-and-other-preservation*. The number of *others* we consider as living within our circle of concern – our *neighbors*, in Jesus' words – is shrinking. When we understand that our lives are inseparably intertwined with every other life on the planet, we behave as if we sink or swim together – because we do. I cannot benefit at your expense, nor can you at mine, except for relatively short periods of time. The universe, or God, has mysterious ways of equalizing advantages, perhaps not today or tomorrow or in this lifetime, but equalization occurs.

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Ultimately, the new/old social pandemic is the repression of conscious compassion, which allows our baser instincts toward selfish entitlement and uncontrolled materialism to gain undue influence. As the gap between the haves and have-nots widens, the needy become needier and the comfortable become greedier. As privileged individuals, we have (mostly unintentionally) created and supported social systems that perpetuate injustice. That sort of imbalance is only corrected in one of two ways: Either the less fortunate rebel and overthrow those in power, or those with power, influence, and/or wealth willingly agree to share it.

Those with much to lose have a vested interest in maintaining the systems that leave increasing numbers of people homeless or marginalized, even as we close our borders to migrants in desperate need of sanctuary. Keeping unjust systems in place is not a conscious choice for most of us, but not working to change them once we know we are benefitting at the expense of the most vulnerable is. For meaningful change to occur, at least without waiting for a violent revolt by those we cast aside, those with influence and power must champion the redesign of our social systems so everyone is assured of sufficient resources to meet life's basic needs for food, shelter, and healthcare, including mental healthcare.

The only way to sustain unjust systems and practices over time is through violence, and once the injustice is exposed even more violence is required until it eventually is turned against those in power. Because

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the natural progression of life is change, all attempts to maintain stasis, stability, or the *status quo* require force. But it is a losing battle because all the forces of God and nature conspire against those who strive to slow or stop the relentless evolutionary flow. The numbers of homeless folks will continue to increase and overrun our neighborhoods until we effectively address the affordable housing crisis, including funding adequate addiction and mental health services. Marginalization will not end until we accept that ostracizing anyone for any reason is ultimately self-defeating. And migrants will continue streaming across our border as long as tyrants hold power over their nations and neighborhoods. These people “invade” “our” space because they *need* what we have.

Followers of Jesus of Nazareth cannot turn a blind eye to suffering wherever it occurs, regardless of the victim or their situation. Being good stewards of the resources entrusted to us does not mean hoarding them in ways that prevent their use in the purposes for which they were created. Good stewardship requires sharing what we have beyond our immediate needs with others, be it money, time, possessions, or influence. We love God by caring for those God loves. That, as I understand the life and teaching of Jesus, is how the kingdom of heaven will manifest on earth.

Endnotes

The contents of this book were initially published as *Life Notes*, the author's weekly blog, and distributed through his website, www.ContemplatingGrace.com, between February and August 2024. Those reflections have been edited and formatted for inclusion in this book.

All scripture references are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*³² translation of the Bible.

³² *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha*, Abingdon Press, 2003.

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