

DEUTERONOMY 26:1-2; 8-12

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name...

For the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power and with signs and wonders and he brought us into this place and gave us this land flowing with milk and honey. "So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year (which is the year of the tithe), giving it to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans and the widows so that they may eat their fill within your towns.

ACTS 4:32-37

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything

they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

SHARING THE WEALTH

Deuteronomy 26:1-2; 8-12

Acts 4:32-37

How are we living together—I mean as a species? With two major wars being waged; the nation of Haiti coming apart at the seams; millions of people migrating from their homelands to countries that don't want them; political polarization wherever you look—the list of our woes goes on and on which would lead us to answer that question, "Not very well". I suspect, however, that the measuring stick for satisfaction with that state of being would vary greatly depending upon your personal status quo. For there are layers upon layers of humans—billionaires flying all over the world in

their private jets to visit their mansions, buying elections or taking lavish vacations all the way down to the bottom rung of humanity where children pick through garbage dumps to find scraps of food or items they might sell on the street for a bit of money.

Did you know that for every dollar the bottom ninety percent make, billionaires gain one point seven million dollars. Think about that! In the United States alone, at least twelve percent of the population lives in poverty and there are many countries in North Africa, South Asia, Latin America and the Middle East where the rates are much greater with extreme poverty on the rise. The inequality among segments of society is hardly a new problem. But as our world population explodes, resources are strained to keep up with demands. And climate change is only making the conditions of poverty more severe. It is overwhelming when you really take stock of the issues.

There have been many attempts over the course of history to enforce greater equality. But look what happens when those efforts are actually implemented. It is usually done by coercion, of course, because people by nature have an unquenchable appetite for more and more wealth. And some have the means to acquire it while many, many more do not and those with the means have the power to pass laws which favor them and

keep the balance sheet tilted in their favor. Mandated Sharing the Wealth is always met with resistance.

Nevertheless, our scriptures for this morning strongly suggest that voluntary Sharing the Wealth is a Divine imperative. It is one of the organizing principles of the emerging Hebrew nation following the forty years in the wilderness and the subsequent occupation of Canaan land to found their fledgling nation. *When you have come into the land that the Lord God is giving you...you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground which you harvest from the land...and you shall put it in a basket...giving it to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans and the widows so that they may eat their fill within your towns.*

And in the Book of Acts which details life in the early church, followers of Jesus not only understand, but act upon the conviction that Sharing the Wealth is an integral faith response to Jesus' sacrifice for our salvation. *No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold...and laid it at the apostles' feet and it was distributed to each as any had need.* In both cases, gratitude for God's graciousness was the inspiration and motive behind their charitable

acts of love.

I too feel an immense sense of gratitude for this beautiful earth we have been given and for the love of God expressed through Jesus Christ and all creation. I take this very seriously and I do tithe ten percent. I am fortunate that I can afford to do so, but many people do not have that ability. But Sharing Wealth is not just about money, it is about sharing ourselves as well. That is perhaps our greatest resource.

Money is obviously essential though because the needs are so great. Governments, which have vast resources from taxation, must be heavily invested. But the political challenges are not easily overcome. The foundational beliefs of our two major political parties could not be more different. Republicans desire low taxes and smaller government relying upon non-profits and charitable organizations to address our social problems while Democrats prefer a larger government and higher taxation to do the same. And lurking in the historical background are the failed attempts to solve economic inequality. For it seems it cannot be implemented without violence, murder, and social upheaval. Look at the bad actors who have imposed dictatorships—Lenin, Castro, Ho Chi Mien, Mao Tse Tung, Stalin...I can't mention them all. No one has figured out how to solve one problem without creating another.

I do not know what the answer is. But I do know that we are rich in so many ways that others are not. And yet, we are not going to sell our houses or our investments and throw the proceeds into a communal pot. We are not going to do that and I'm not sure that Jesus would even suggest it. But what he did teach (the parable of the poor widow putting her penny into the offering) is that compassion for our neighbors in need is of the highest spiritual value. And remember, Wealth is not just monetary, it is also our time and our talents. Sharing the Wealth includes everything we bring to the table. Give as you can however you can. But give!

Reverend Thomas Dunlap April 7, 2024