

A Caring Economy



Dear Friends,

“The crisis of homelessness in our time is a spiritual crisis that is rooted in the spiritual captivity of our culture to an understanding of economic life that is, at its heart, idolatry.” This quote by Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh summarize not only the reason for the crisis of homelessness but the anxiety, depression, and restlessness that exists in the lives of so many today.

Are you even aware of the spiritual captivity of America’s culture to an economic lifestyle that is rooted in idolatry? Wendel Berry explains this system when he says, “There is the kind of economy that exists to protect the “right” of profit, as does our present public economy; this sort of economy will inevitably gravitate towards the protection of the “rights” of those who profit most. Our present public economy is really a political system that safeguards the private exploitation of public wealth and health. The other kind of economy exists for the protection of gifts... and this is the economy of community, which now has nearly been destroyed by the public economy.”

The truth of Berry’s statement rings louder now than at anytime in American history. The Supreme Court decision to remove all limits on campaign contributions has virtually allowed those with the most money to buy elections in America. Few Christians are aware how they are enslaved by an economy of greed. This is evidenced by how quick they are sucked in by politicians claiming to be pro-life who are actually bought and paid for by wealthy corporate interests.

The Scriptures illustrate for us how the community for which caring economics is present, is one which is obligated to give to those in need until the need is met (Deut. 14:28-29, Deut. 15:8-10). Caring economics doesn’t just provide a hand out but a hand up (Deut. 15:12-15, Lev. 25). When greedy economics drives, Israel’s engines, the prophets condemned the nation’s insensitivity to the poor. They taught that materialism and ignoring the poor and homeless is as sinful as idolatry and adultery.

“This is what the Lord says, ‘For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane My holy name’” (Amos 2:6, 7).

America in the midst of its excessive capitalism claims to be a Christian nation. Yet when we look at the Scriptures through the eyes of forgotten Americans, the poor, fatherless, widowed and homeless, we realize that the scriptures teach that mercy to the needy is evidence of a life truly committed to God (Isa. 1:10-17, 58:6-7; Amos 4:1-6, 5:21-24).

Jonathon Edward’s in his discourse, Christian Charity, points out that caring for the poor is “a thing so essential, that the contrary cannot consist with a sincere love for God” (J John 3:17-19). Those with a sincere love for God are part of a caring economy that focuses on “justice and mercy”. “What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Bob Goudzward and Harry deLange in their work, Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Toward an Economy of Care, stated, “I’m an economy of care, economic stated, “needs or ends include more than what the output of production can satisfy. They also include what human culture needs to survive: the level of care required for the environment to remain fertile; the amount of care needed to sustain communities, so people’s care for each other will acquire continuity and tradition; and adequate care for employment opportunities and the quality of work.”

This is the hope for America. This is the hope for the homeless and the hurting. It is the hope for creation and an economy enslaved in a culture of greed. This hope is not religion but a relationship with Jesus Christ, the world’s greatest revolutionary who has come to set free the captives to the economy of greed and the politics of self-service.

How do we begin to grasp this reality in a country that not only is intoxicated with greed and materialism in the market place but also has persuaded much of the church to crucify Jesus on a golden cross in the name of prosperity theology? The answer is for us to take a closer look at the Christ of the scriptures. Tim Keller in his paper, The Gospel and the Poor, gives us this insight when he states, “In Proverbs and Matthew 25, God

identifies with the poor symbolically. But in the incarnation and death of Jesus, we see God identifies with the poor and marginal literally. Jesus was born in a feeding trough. At His circumcision Jesus family offered what was required of the poor (Luke 2:24). He said, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head’ (Matt 8:20). At the end of his life, He rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, spent his last evening in a borrowed room, and when He died, was laid in a borrowed tomb. They cast lots for his only possession, His robe, for there on the cross He was stripped of everything. All this gives new meaning to the question: ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or in prison?’ The answer is – on the cross, where he died amidst the thieves, among the marginalized. No wonder Paul could say that once you see Jesus becoming poor for us, you will never look at the poor the same way again.”

It was over thirty-eight years ago when I came face to face with the Jesus of the Scriptures. He redefined my worldview. Questions like “Who am I?”, “Where am I going?”, “What am I living for?” were defined in the shadow of the cross and the power of the resurrection. No longer was my life my own, but it belonged to Jesus, who said, “As often as you have done it to the least of these, even so you have done it unto me” (Matt 25:40).

The sharp two-edged sword of God’s word had pierced my heart. “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even in dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:12-13).

I was uncovered by the double-edged sword of God’s word. The one side was convicting me that Jesus Christ had come to save sinners like me who were living exclusively for themselves. Once receiving this grace that He was extending to me through His death and resurrection, I would let the other side of this sword of God’s word empower me to live out the calling He had placed upon my life. For each person this calling is different. In my case it was to step out in faith with my wife Penny and start the New Life Evangelistic Center as a place of hospitality. As we sought to create a caring economy we opened our home to those in need.

Following the revolutionary teachings of Jesus Christ in a culture of greed and self-centeredness is not easy. The demands from the hurting and

homeless, the daily material needs, staff with their personal struggles, and a political and corporate world that was constantly trying to get us to compromise with its anti-scriptural value system would have easily destroyed us if it had not been for the power of prayer and the life of the Holy Spirit working through the Scriptures.

This power at work through the double-edged sword of God's word is reflected in Penny's writings that were published a year after her death. In the one entitled, I Failed to Realize, she reflected on this strength for living that only God can give:

"It was Sunday night at our 111 year old house on Park Avenue. Larry was down at the headquarters. Our three bouncy children were asking for "just one more story," three homeless women were waiting in the living room; I was weary from a long day, and for the tenth time that night the phone rang. I thought of the diapers that still had to be dried and the pile of dishes in the sink as I grabbed for the telephone receiver.

I tried to sound pleasant as I heard the familiar words, "I was wondering if you had room for me to spend the night." I sighed and asked her what her situation was. As she told me of her plans to leave her husband, I thought of how Jesus must have felt when the multitudes of sick and demon-possessed people came to him, and He never turned anyone away. I realized that the only way He had the strength for this was by relying completely on His Father. I also remembered Larry's words the night before, "You're trying to do it all by yourself. You've got to draw your strength from the Lord. You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you. If you focus on yourself and all the things you are doing, you will be tired! Just focus on Jesus and let Him empower you."

With that in mind I grew very interested in what the woman was saying on the telephone. Her basic problem was loneliness and not knowing how to please her husband so that he would be more sensitive to her needs. I felt a real love for her and told her that her husband didn't need a lonely, whining wife. He needed a woman of inner strength and beauty, which comes only from being in close fellowship with God. As she realized her spiritual poverty, she gladly prayed with me to surrender her life to God and receive the gift of eternal life purchased by Jesus Christ's death on the cross. I was able to assure her that God, Himself would give her the strength she needed if she remained close to Him. The relief in her voice was apparent and the joy in my heart superseded and banished my weariness. I felt refreshed and ready for anything. Love truly has no limits as to what it can accomplish. I knew when I experienced that weariness again, I would realize that I'd gotten my eyes off of Jesus, onto things, resulting in the incapacity to love others. Believe me, that's a road I want to avoid traveling."

It was St. Paul who declared, “I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 4:10, 11).

How many like Esau have traded their inheritance of deeply knowing Christ for the “stew” of materialism and comfort that the economy of greed offers? Tim Keller, whose work The Gospel and the Poor, I sited earlier states that when Paul asks for financial generosity in 2 Cor. 8:8-9, “he points to the self-emptying of Jesus, vividly depicting Him as becoming poor for us, both literally and spiritually, in the incarnation and on the cross. The argument seems to be that if you grasp substitutionary atonement “(that is where Jesus paid the price for your sins on the cross)” in both your head and your heart, you will be profoundly generous to the poor. Think it out! The only way for Jesus to get us out of our spiritual poverty and into spiritual riches was to get out of His spiritual riches into spiritual poverty. This should not be the pattern of your life. Give your resources away and enter into need so that those in need will be resourced. Paul also implies here that all sinners saved by grace will look at the poor of this world and feel that in some way they are looking in the mirror. The superiority will be gone.” After all wasn’t it while we were yet poor, hopeless sinners that Christ took the initiative and died for us?

Redeemed people are a part of the caring, economic system. They are a people who are in this world as Jesus said, but they are not of it.

In conclusion lets heed this warning that Wendell Berry gives in recognizing that “the global economy does not exist to help the communities and localities of the globe but exist to siphon the wealth of those communities and places it into a few bank accounts.” The end result is that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer. Berry goes on to say that, “those who wish to help communities to survive had better understand that a merely political freedom means little within a totalitarian economy.”

The temptation is for us to withdraw within our own spiritual cocoon shutting out the needs of others. Such a response is detrimental not only to the hopes and dreams of the oppressed, the homeless and the hurting but to our own spiritual well being.

Jesus doesn't spend a whole lot of time talking about hell, but the couple of times he speaks about the weeping and gnashing of teeth it has to do with the need for each of us to move into the economy of caring. One instance is found in Matt 25 when He says, as often as we have done it to the least of these we have done it unto Him. The other time is found in the parable about Lazarus and the rich man, who was enslaved in his economy of greed and indifference to the poor. Now God is calling all of us to love people out of the hell they may find themselves in and encourage them to come into the economy of caring and sharing that Christ's love provides.

As we strive to be a part of God's caring economy let us not forget the importance of prayer, daily Bible reading and constantly being aware through the power of the Holy Spirit that, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Peter 1:3,4).

Yours in Christ Service in a caring economy,

Larry Rice